

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, Cycle B – Jan. 1, 2012

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Reflections on **Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Lk 2: 16-21**

Today's readings take us from the very night of Jesus' birth, when the shepherds arrive at the manger, to the eighth day, when he was initiated into the Jewish people through the ritual of circumcision and naming.

In my own family, we have just spent a week with a relatively new baby – Leena turned four months old yesterday, so we can attest that even on a purely human, natural level, a new baby softens our hearts and lifts our spirits, something our nativity scenes every Christmas are meant to do for all of us.

Though I am not sure what connection the creators of our lectionary intended, it seems to me that the gospel scene of the shepherds' visit is bathed in the light of the blessing that God gave to Moses to pass on to Aaron in our first reading:

May God bless you and keep you!

May God's face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!

May God look kindly upon you and give you peace.

I find it interesting that it was *God*, who gave us the words of this blessing; it expresses the relationship God wants to have with his people. Nativity scenes are a reminder that God wants his face to shine on all of us

Of course what we see in our nativity scenes are only a part of the story. They are like the numerous photos we have of our granddaughter Leena – taken at the best moments, when she is sleeping peacefully, or looking wide-eyed at this amazing world, or (the best) smiling contentedly. They are a vital part of the story, because we need these moments that lift our eyes out of the everyday, draw our attention to the deeper meanings of our life, remind us of

our blessings, and give us the strength to carry out our ordinary daily tasks

But behind the camera are some very sleep-deprived people, working hard to provide for the very basic, elemental needs of an infant. This was surely as true in Bethlehem as it is for any new parents today. The baby needs to be fed – which means the mother has to be fed (Joseph has a big job!); the baby has to be kept clean, and so do the swaddling clothes (there is lots of laundry); the baby has to be kept warm, sheltered from wind and rain, and protected from whatever germs, or insects, or wild beasts might harm him or her.

The moment depicted in tonight's nativity scene is wonderful and extraordinary, and we are right to stop, and ponder, and rejoice in it. But nobody in the scene is having an easy life.

Our gospel starts with the shepherds hastening to find the baby in the manger. As we remember from last week's gospel, they were living out in the open – the Greek verb says “living wild,” in other words, “roughing it,” which is what you have to do to find good grazing land and safe, accessible water for your animals. Essentially, they are sharing the life of their flock.

So the shepherds came as they were. They did not have time, or the opportunity, to wash up, change their clothes, or get the sheep smell off them. Nor did it matter, because the family they were visiting were also pretty much “roughing it.” The baby was in an animal's feeding trough, after all, in some out-building, or more likely, a cave in a hillside (as the icon tradition has it), on the outskirts of Bethlehem. They were living on the margins.

If we were to transpose the scene to our own

time and place, we might imagine the angel appearing to migrant farm workers camping out near the broccoli or strawberry fields of Santa Maria; perhaps the angel would have sent them to some outlying farm building in Guadalupe to look for the newborn baby.

In any case, there is an affinity, a likeness, between the shepherds and the parents. Both are sharing the life of the creatures they are caring for, and they are intensely involved in providing for the most basic needs to sustain life: food, water, shelter, warmth, protection.

After the shepherds left, Luke tells us that *Mary treasured these things and reflected on them in her heart*. Of course, we don't know what thoughts occurred to her then, or maybe later, when she could look back on them from a more normal life back in Nazareth. Perhaps she remembered that Bethlehem was where Samuel came at God's command to find a leader for the Jewish people. You remember the story: Jesse brought no fewer than seven strapping sons to Samuel, and not one fit the bill; there remained only the littlest, the least, David, who had been left behind to attend to the crucial, but menial task of caring for the sheep.

God seems to want leaders who have that kind of life experience. After all, 300 years earlier, God had called out from a burning bush to a man who was herding sheep at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses was on the run, having killed a man in Egypt, so he fled into the wilderness and found a new life as a herdsman. As you know, God sent him back to Egypt to bring his people out of slavery. Having done that, he brought them back to Mt. Sinai, where he had first met God. Then he went up the mountain to meet God again—and to bring back the Law, the rules by which the Hebrews were to live.

After this, the Hebrew people prepared to set out on what would become a 40-year trek through the wilderness. In fact, it was during this preparation period that God gave Moses the blessing we heard in the first reading. Moses would spend the rest of his life leading his people through the wilderness, much like a shepherd—or perhaps God was the true shepherd—providing them food (even strange food

like manna) and drink (even water from a rock).

David lived in a different, more settled, society, in the Promised Land, one that even had cities. David, after all, was able to build himself a palace in his new city, Jerusalem, though, as you all heard in a recent reading, he felt bad that God was still living in a tent, instead of a temple. David evidently never forgot his shepherding roots: he is justly famous for his psalm about God being his shepherd, leading him to green pastures and still waters, guiding and protecting him with his rod and his staff.

I wonder what Mary thought as she pondered what her son was up to as he grew up. She would live to see Jesus become a different kind of leader—for a very different world, much more urbanized, and under the iron rule of a vast, pagan empire. Did she connect the kind of man Jesus was becoming with the shepherds who were his first visitors?

Of course, a shepherd who lived among the sheep and lay down his life for them was outside the frame of thought of the Jerusalem establishment. And so, tragically, the official religious leaders of the time colluded with the emperor's men to put Jesus to death. Evidently, the temple leadership thought of Moses and David as military leaders, not shepherds, and so they missed the signs of the times, and the promptings of God's Spirit.

Paul, who was a ferocious Pharisee before he became a follower of Christ, acknowledges Jesus' Jewish heritage, *born of a woman, born under the Law*. But he saw Jesus as freeing him, Paul, and his people, as well as the Gentiles, from a too-ethnocentric set of practices. As far as we know, he never met Mary; today's second reading is his only mention of her, and he does not even refer to her by name. What would she have thought of this apostle to the Gentiles? We do not know. Luke *does* tell us that she joined the company of disciples in Jerusalem, which suggests that her life experience, and her pondering, brought her to Pentecost, when people of every nation felt the fire of the Spirit.

As we know in our own Church of the Beatitudes, it is not easy both to appreciate the

richness and depth of one's tradition, and to feel compelled to open it up to a broader, more inclusive vision. How do we know that what we are doing is right? Well, perhaps we don't, ultimately, know. We will stumble and make mistakes and argue over how to do things – as Paul argued with Peter and James and others over what to keep of the Jewish tradition and what to declare optional. But we of the Church of the Beatitudes can and must keep as our touchstone

the example of Jesus, the good shepherd: who lived among his people, attending to their most basic needs for food and healing; who taught us that we are no longer slaves, but friends, and that we can call God “Abba.”

If we accept his example, then we are right to join the family and the shepherds around the manger, where God continues to bless and keep us, shine his face upon us, look kindly upon us, and give us peace.