

Dear Friends in our Savior Jesus Christ,

Personality profiles are everywhere. There are profiles to find leadership styles, teamwork strengths, marriage enhancement and everything else. One rather older one—like all the way back from the 70's—is a story about a walk in the woods. You have many choices on your journey. You choose the things you take – a backpack, water, food, friends, or more, or none of the above. You decide how you choose your path – whether with a compass, dead reckoning, or because you like the way the path looks. The most important part of this story is when you meet a bear in the woods. What would you do when a bear roars up eyeing you up like a piece of bacon fried just right – you know, right in between soft and crispy? One woman told me about an uncle who took that test. Her words will stick with me. Her uncle said, “I would take that bear, reach down its throat, grab its tail and pull it inside out.” You see, *that* part of the story describes how you deal with problems. She said, “That is just how my uncle deals with problems.” Perhaps that is something to learn for those of us who would prefer to climb a sturdy tree and wait the bear out.

Today, in the reading God wrote down for us, God reveals something of his own personality profile. He tells us

HOW GOD DEALS WITH PROBLEMS

I. A Huge Global Problem

II. A Small Personal Problem

I. What is the biggest problem of mankind? Everyone has their own opinions. Some would say it is poverty, others poor education, others disease and death, others would pin the world's problems on ungodly living, and there are more opinions.

And we all hold that we have at least part of the solution. Government programs and international aid are the cure for some. Others will try to reform health care and educational systems. Others will say that if we could just straighten people out morally, we would have a perfect world.

The Jews of 1BC had a problem we Americans have not experienced for centuries. They were ruled by outsiders. For most of 600 years, one foreign power or another had ruled Israel. They were conquered and taxed, enslaved and insulted. The Jews just couldn't make sense of this foreign rule thing. They were supposed to be God's special people. No wonder they had arguments about the coming Messiah. It was one of the big theological questions among the Jewish religious scholars. Would the long-awaited Messiah appear as a humble servant or a victorious conqueror? You see, the Old Testament talks quite a bit about both – a humble servant and a victorious conqueror. It was the classic either/or argument. How would God deal with their problems?

In Luke 1, God begins to show his hand, but just begins. He sends an angel to a tiny town up in the hills, to some very ordinary young woman. The holy record seems intent on pointing out her ordinariness; and by contrast, how extra-ordinary the Christ-child would be.

Do you remember one of the first parts of the children's service last week? They recited several of the many names of Jesus – Prince of Peace, Son of God. Well just listen to the names the angel gives in our short reading, “*Jesus, Son of the Most High, king, the Holy One, Son of God.*” Make no mistake, the baby we celebrate at Christmas be no ordinary baby. Jesus would not just be above average or even in the 100th percentile. He would be different in kind – true God as much as true human.

Which comes down to the problem of the meaning of Christmas. We cannot expect people who are not Christians to accept what our reading says. It is a matter of faith. We believe that Jesus was born

to the Virgin Mary just as much as we believe in God as the Creator of the Universe. The same God who in an instant created the matter of this world and in another instant ordered atoms to form protein molecules and ordered those protein molecules to form DNA – that same Creator God apparently re-ordered or created DNA so that Jesus Christ was born as true man. No wonder the non-Christian world doesn't get it about Christmas. The real meaning of Christmas requires someone to have faith – not that optimism we sometimes call faith [“just believe”] – but only by complete trusting-in-God faith, something like a small child's faith in his dad and mom.. only with that faith can Christmas' real meaning be understood. At Christmas the Christian says that he believes that God did something impossible nine months before Jesus was born. And it is this impossibility which creates another impossibility – that sinful humans should be saved and live forever in the presence of a sinless God. But we get ahead of ourselves here. We are in advent, not Christmas or Easter.

Like Mary, we wait for the Savior. Like a child sitting before the Christmas tree for days or weeks, wondering what is in that shiny, bowed package, so Advent is a time to, in a way, forget all that we know about the Christ. Yes, that's right. Forget what you know about Jesus and stand with Mary, wondering what great things this child will be and do.

Ever been around those people who slowly open the present. They see the present, they rattle it. Finally, after a minute or more, they ask if someone has a knife or scissors so they can cut the tape and not tear the wrapping paper. And it's driving you nuts because you can't wait to see the look on their face when they finally see what is inside. It's kind of like that with Advent. If I go straight to Christmas, I am ruining the day for you. Sometimes we hear Christmas every single week of Advent. But here I want you to stand still with Mary. Imagine hearing that the Savior promised for thousands of years is coming to you, but you really don't know what it means. Mary had to wait those nine months, and then another 33 years, to understand what the angel had told her that time he appeared to her when she was a teenager. Can you imagine that? Taking 33 years and 9 months to unwrap the most special present you ever got from any one? Well, I want you to be there, to feel an expectation that is consuming you. That you wish you could walk away from, but you just can't. Wait. He is coming. But instead of nine months, just wait four more days. Wait. The Son of David, David's Son yet David's Lord, is coming. We don't know what his kingdom will look like. We just know he is going to do what we could not.

Yes, with a little more patience than we impatient humans, God is going to take the problem, the big brown grizzly bear of sin, grab its tail and turn it inside out. And this child would do it somehow.

II. Which is all fine and good for everyone else on the planet, but to Mary, this was going to be just a bit inconvenient. In fact, God was going to ruin her life – yah, sure, her little boy would save the world, but at the cost of Mary's future. She was a young woman (probably in her teens still) looking forward to marriage and life in a little out-of-the-way place to a local craftsman, hoping (God-willing) for the voices of children to fill their house. But that was not going to happen if she fell pregnant before marriage. This was the time before cell phones, internet, even before television if you can imagine that. Before cars, trains and stagecoaches. She was probably going to be born, live and die in the same small town of just a few hundred people. And in a town like that, she was not going to have much of a future if God was going to save the world by asking this of her.

You know, we really can't know what went on in the mind of Mary when she asked that question of the angel, **“How will this be?”** Was it mere surprise and wonder? Was there a little bit of – and I don't mean to accuse Mary of this, but I have heard it from many people – was there a little bit of resentment in Mary's question. Maybe it was something like, “God, if that is what you want of me, you really ask too much.” Or maybe a bit softer, “God, you have great and good plans, but are you sure I have to be part of this?” Or maybe a mere whimper, “Yes, dear God. But please, just please.” I really don't know what Mary was thinking. But I have heard all of those responses to God's plans –

things said by godly Christians.

God's plans *are* sometimes inconvenient. What do you say at those times? If you have the custom of praying before a meal, what will you do in a restaurant where public opinion might not be on your side? What do you do when it comes time to file taxes. There is some income on the side that Uncle Sam would never find out about. Do you claim it or not? God's will isn't always profitable like some people would suggest. What would happen if I admitted that I was wrong and that I started the fight? God's ways don't always allow me "save face". These are the sorts of problems God causes in our lives. Sometimes we lose something very dear and special when God talks to us. I know of people who have lost lots for God. And not all of them can look back and say with a smile, "Yah, but that's OK." Sometimes it hurts, and when we pretend it ain't so, that has a way of coming back years later in resentment, even hatred, toward God.

But for Mary, this miracle pregnancy outside of wedlock would only be the beginning of her questions. What would she think when her engagement threatened to fall apart – all because of God's plan? What would she think when Joseph woke her from a dead sleep in the middle of the night and she had to hurry for Egypt as fast their donkey would carry them? What would she think when the men and women of the town where her dear Jesus grew up tried to kill him right after a church service? What would she think when thousands were following her son Jesus and things were going to chaos? I'll tell you what she thought, she thought her son had lost his mind, gone *loco*, so she took Jesus' brothers to find him and stop his crazy mission. If you never heard about that, you can look it up in Mark 3:21. What would Mary think when she saw her son die like a dog? If the news the angel brought to Mary was too much, just imagine what the next 34 years of her life were like. Don't think that it was an easy thing to be Mary, mother of Jesus. She had problems, real problems that we can sympathize with. What was God's answer?

God's answer to the planet-wide problem of sin was to send a solution in the form of a baby. What was God's answer to the personal problems that Mary had because of God's own plan? Well, first off, remember that Mary didn't know all that would happen to her. All she knew was that she would have a child in about nine months. And to that simple question about a problem that this baby would cause her, the Lord had sent his servant Gabriel with an answer. ***"The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'*** Notice the kind of answer that God gave her. He affirmed her and his commitment to her. God *would* be with her. But also notice that God did not explain every last detail to her. His answer was an answer to a believer. "I, God, am going to do this. Trust me." If anyone should understand that, it should be the sort of people who sit before me. When orders are given, you appreciate knowing as much as you can, but you also know that it might just be better that you don't know all the details. It is through trust in the command that success happens.

I don't know that much about soldiering yet. I look forward to learning more in the coming years. And I hope my children learn a lot about it as well – the commitment, the humility, the straightforwardness. But here in my state of ignorance I imagine that few soldiers could offer more than Mary here offers. Here she stands before the chief angel of the Lord's armies, the biggest man other than the Big Man himself. She hears her "orders" if you will. Strange, incredible, impossible orders. A mission she herself does not really know that much about. She knows that there is no particular reason she should be there. Out of hundreds of thousands of enlisted personnel, the Lord chose her. She is just wondering, "Me? Really? Me?" And when she hears that incredible command and when she hears that the Commander-in-Chief has commanded it to be so, and he has personally promised all support and backup to make it a success, this recruit simply says... She salutes and says, ***"May it be to me as you have said."*** Then the angel left her.

Lord, as you have said in your Word, let it be to me. Amen.