

Hear again from tonight’s Gospel reading:

And [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:15-19)

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Heavenly Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

[A Night for Joy]

Brothers and Sisters, Merry Christmas!

There’s a famous Charles Dickens novel that is popular this time of year: *A Christmas Carol*.

Perhaps you’ve read it. It is surprisingly dark for a popular story.

As you likely know, it follows the ruthless businessman, Ebenezer Scrooge.

He considers Christmas “humbug,” abuses his employees,
and cares nothing for the plight of poor, sick Tiny Tim.

Until one Christmas, when he hears bells ringing.

In Dickens’ words, they “*lasted half a minute, or a minute, but seemed an hour.*”

Then he hears chains scraping down the hallway,

And those chains belong to the decaying ghost of his late business partner,
Jacob Marley, who forged those chains by his own sins!

And if that’s not dark enough, Scrooge is then haunted by three more ghosts—
the last of whom is not exactly friendly!

It is a *dark* story! (*Merry Christmas!*)

That’s why I like watching the movie version that was made by the Muppets.

(*Merry Christmas, indeed!*)

The Muppets don’t downplay the darkness of the story,
but they do interject a little *joy*.

(For it is *joy*, not *darkness* at the heart of Dickens’ story.)

At the end, when Scrooge learns to love others,

He prepares a Christmas feast for everyone.

Tiny Tim gives his famous prayer: “God bless us, every one!”

—and around the table, the Muppets flail their little arms in joy.

Tonight, is a night for joy.

Tonight, we forget about presents.

Tonight, we set aside the troubles of COVID life.

Tonight, the *darkness* of the world fades away, and...

like Mary, we meditate on the birth of our Savior,

treasuring up all these things, and pondering them in our hearts.

[Really Human]

“Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

It’s a rather peculiar sentence in the middle of the nativity story, isn’t it?

Luke is speaking of Caesars and governors and kings and a great census—the stuff of Empire.

And of angels and the fulfillment of prophecies—the stuff of great cosmic importance.

And nestled into the middle of all... *that*—the mundane musings of a mom.

It’s like throwing a Muppet into a dark ghost story!

It’s cute, but what is it doing there? It is there to bring us *joy*.

Yet it's a wonderful lesson from the Mother of God *about her Son*.

In a book about the universe and angels and demons and salvation and eternity,

Luke took time to write about the *real* feelings of a *real* mother.

Because it shows that God didn't just come to be *with* humankind;

He *really became* human.

We have a carol that we sing at Christmas, *Away in a Manger*.

It has several lines that seem silly, maybe even theologically wrong at first glance:

“The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes

*But little Lord Jesus, **no crying He makes...**”*

But the truth is, God *really* became human.

He *really* cried, like any other Baby, when he wanted his mother.

He *really* ate.

He *really* drank—wines and beers, too!

He *really* laughed and joked and played.

He *really* flailed his little ‘Muppet arms,’ as babies do.

And His mother, Mary, *really* treasured up all those little things,

just like any other parent, and pondered them in her heart.

[Really God]

It is good that we also take time

to treasure up all these things, and ponder them in our hearts, like Mary.

Because when we strip away the tinsel and the tree and presents—

And the candles and the carols and even the creche—

There’s a dark truth ‘haunting’ the nativity story

that would scare the Charles Dickens out of anyone:

This Baby had come to die.

The spectre of what He came to do looms over the whole nativity story.

Yes, He *really* ate and drank and played and all that—

And He would *really* hurt.

And He would *really* suffer.

And there *really* was a time when “no crying He makes” *really* was true:

When He stood on trial before the Sanhedrin and Pilate and Herod on a false accusation,

Yet made no cry for His innocence.

The Lamb of God went uncomplaining forth; willingly, knowingly.
He *really* died, *for the forgiveness of all our sins*.

Rather changes the “*Away in a Manger*,” doesn’t it?
The almighty God sets aside His glory to become “*the little Lord Jesus*,”
He “*laid down His sweet head*” to receive a crown of thorns, all for our benefit.
Then was laid into a borrowed Tomb because there was “*No crib for His bed*.”

It’s a dark story. (*Merry Christmas!*)
Yet... yet he comes to us with joyful little ‘Muppet arms’ flailing.
(For it is *joy*, not *darkness* at the heart of Christ’s story.)
A Baby in a manger.
A *real* Baby in a manger. (*Merry Christmas, indeed!*)

[Really for Us]

And this story—with all its darkness and ‘Muppet-arm moments’—is told for us.
Because no matter how dark the world gets, its ending is heartwarming:
The *real* Baby who was *really* born,
Who *really* ate and *really* drank and *really* suffered and *really* died—
He also *really* rose from the grave.
He *really* did all these things *for us*,
that we might live forever with Him too.

To remind us of this truth,
He prepares a Christ-mass feast for us,
where He *really* offers us His own Body and Blood.
(Cue Tiny Tim: “God *has* blessed us, every one.”)

Treasure up these things that happened “*Away in a Manger*,”
Ponder them *here* in your heart.
Let those Muppet arms fly with joy.
Your God is *real*.
And He will “*stay by our cradles ‘til [the] morning [of the Resurrection] is nigh*.”

**Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among the people. Amen! (Psalm 96:3)**
