Spirituality
Scripture for Life



Women view "The Madonna and Child" by Fra Bartolomeo as it hangs in Christie's gallery Jan. 29, 2013, in New York. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)



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"Happy New Year!" If you're from Denver, you not only might repeat that greeting through the month, but also leave your Christmas lights on until Jan. 22, the last day of the National Western Stock Show. If that seems overdone, remember that we've been celebrating the Nativity of Christ for nearly 1,800 years (though nobody seems quite sure who chose Dec. 25 over Jan. 6 as Jesus' day of birth).

Most liturgists will tell us that, in spite of the hype of Christmas, Easter is the center of the church year. Yet, there would be no Easter without a Nativity, no cross or Resurrection without an Incarnation. That brings us to the feast we celebrate today, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

This title, Mother of God, has been at the heart of immense, intense theological debate. It's not hard to understand why some considered the very idea as blasphemous: How could a creature be mother to God? Yet, that is exactly what the somewhat strange translation of the Nicene Creed defends with the phrase that describes Jesus Christ as "incarnate of the Virgin Mary."

The Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

January 1, 2023

Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 67
Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:16-21

It may seem simple to say that through Mary, Christ is flesh of our flesh. It becomes a bit more shocking to say that God, the creator of the universe, chooses to be dependent on humanity in order to become one of us. The title Mother of God necessarily infers an almost scandalous degree of mutuality between humanity and divinity.

One response to this would be to write it all off as hifalutin theology, too convoluted to consider on the morning after New Year's Eve. On the other hand, there might be no more appropriate day to contemplate this mystery than the one on which many of us have made ourselves particularly aware of the limitations of our own incarnation and are looking toward starting anew.

We can read today's Liturgy of the Word as the description of a crescendoing process that invites us to move through God's blessing on all creation, to adoption, to the intimacy of shared life. For Christians, this is a summary of the history of salvation and ultimately an invitation to mysticism.

Now, lest we think that this is just too much, even for New Year's Day, we can turn to today's Gospel as a simple story that invites us to more than we might ask or imagine. Luke tells us that the first nonfamily members to discover Emmanuel were shepherds, denigrated folks of meager means whose work required very little in the way of intelligence or creativity.

Perhaps their poverty and lack of sophistication opened them to wonders that the "wise and the learned" knew too much to comprehend. They had been told not to fear and to go find a savior whose circumstances were as humble as their own. And that was exactly what they found: an infant cared for by two migrants who had made him a bed in a cattle crib. Somehow, for these shepherds, that was enough to make them spread the message to whoever would listen.

In relation to today's readings, the shepherds might represent the movement from the blessing described in the Book of Numbers to the joy of experiencing the Spirit's work in them that Paul described to the Galatians. The cry "Abba, Father!" could be the gist of their glad tidings to others.

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We see the next step, the move from adoration to mysticism, in Mary who "kept all these things in her heart."

Luke's Gospel emphasizes that the birth of Christ came to pass because Mary identified herself as the servant of the Lord who, like her son, made it her life's goal that God's will be done through her. The birth of Christ, God's personal incarnation in

history, took place through Mary's collaboration. She made herself available for God to do what God could not do without her.

This brings us to two of Christianity's most radical claims. First, the fact that God depended on Mary for the Incarnation reveals that God's power is vulnerable love that has nothing to do with domination.

More radically, Mary is not unique: Jesus himself said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (Luke 8:21). Thus, as Meister Eckhart explained 700 years ago, "We are all meant to be mothers of God."

The Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, invites us to marvel at the God who comes to us in loving vulnerability and dependence. Following Mary, we are called to do nothing less than repeat her words: "May it be done in me according to your will."

Christ is always needing to be born in and among us, and that calls for every year to be a New Year.