



ILLINOIS Focus



John Gryś



More Than Our Eyes

Only Matthew and Luke concern themselves with the actual events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Matthew, for reasons tied to his purpose, brings to bear certain stories surrounding this wondrous event. Luke, for a host of different reasons, brings to bear other stories. As I reflect during this season on the fully rounded reporting of the actual birth narrative, the words of a song come to mind: "There is more to see than with my eyes."

It is easy for us with all the beauty and bustle of this season to limit our understanding to eyes only. These various accounts surrounding the birth provide us with a sobering reminder: the eyes don't have it.

A feeding trough. An earliteen girl. A star. Shepherds. None of these are outside the mundane artifacts of doing life on this planet. All are part of the regular, everyday life of first century inhabitants of Palestine. Nothing extraordinary. "Nothing to see here, folks." Until. A Divine movement infuses the ordinary and with that infusion comes a way of seeing that goes beyond physical eyesight.

- An inanimate object like a feeding trough now houses the greatest transforming agent in the universe.

- A pimple-faced earliteen becomes the embryonic home for God to grow.

- A heavenly object now shapeshifts into a mobile angelic GPS.

- A band of blue-collar menial workers now become the marketing team for the greatest desire of all ages.

For this season, I see more than Santas, more than trees in a home, more than garland on the tree, more than gifts under the tree. There is so much more to see than with my eyes. Our world, our ordinary life, catapulted into the extraordinary. The glory of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength moves us into a whole-person experience of the extraordinary in the midst of the

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ISSUE FOCUS

CHRISTMAS

And all that transfers into new sources of meaning. Jesus, in the feeding trough, is potentially Christ, the Savior. Mary, a teenage girl, is potentially the mother of God. Stars in the sky are potentially angels leading the spiritual to a sacred place. Shepherds, one of the lowest on the socio-economic ladder, potentially become heralds of the greatest gift. Suddenly, eternal significance shows up in the ordinary.

ordinary. Mary and Joseph could never look at dirty diapers the same. They would never look at foreigners from afar the same.

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A Christmas Love Song

Pastor Ira Bartolome



Do you have a favorite Christmas song? If yes, consider the reasons why it is your favorite.

And if you have curated a Christmas playlist, what if

said playlist was a list of love songs to God?

In scripture, songs have a special place. According to Kranz, there are at least 185 songs in scripture. Some of them poems or lyrics set to music. They address topics like battles, coronations, funerals, and God's miracles. Most are found in the Book of Psalms. Significant songs include Moses and Miriam's song, or the songs of David's victory and deliverance. Intriguing are the songs in Revelation, like chapter 5 "Worthy is the Lamb," or chapter 15 the "Song of Moses" and the "Song of the Lamb." How about Revelation chapter 14 and the song only the 144,000 know?

But the song we should be reminded of today is Mary's Song. Luke 1:35, "And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" Mary is to give birth to the coming Messiah, and she has humbly embraced her role.

However, consider her troubling circumstances of being single and pregnant. What about support for a baby much less a future king? How about the criticisms of society? In spite of these challenges, Mary breaks into a joyful song. Luke 1:46-47, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." Mary's heart is full of God's love even to the point of overflowing. Have you ever been so full of joy that you couldn't help but sing? Mary's song can give us encouragement today. In verses 46 and 47, Mary puts the all-important

focus on God. Notice the self-esteem of Mary in verses 48 and 52, God has "regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed," and He has, "exalted the lowly." Her sense of identity flows from God.

Mary's song causes us to think on the mightiness of God, His holiness, His mercy, His arm strength, verses 49-51. These are awesome characteristics. We should take a few moments even now to praise God for these attributes.

There are a few more themes to think on. The first is the theme of humility. Mary saw herself as a humble servant of the Lord. Another theme is God's mercy. He desires to help His people, verse 50 and 54. Yet another theme is the justice of God, verses 51-53.

What a profound and inspiring love song! The song of Mary can minister to us today during the troubling and awesome experience of end times. And through Mary's unusual experience she worships God with song. So can we. And we should. We might need to delete a few songs from our Christmas playlist and perhaps add a few more.

Are you experiencing confusion and perplexity like Mary? Are you having anxieties regarding the short-term and long-term difficulties? Are the negative voices and criticisms around you overwhelming? I invite you to humble yourself before God and let the character of Jesus gestate within you. Perhaps your life would turn into a love song to Jesus.

Mary was able to sing a love song to God because God had given her The Song; that song is Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God's love song to a sin-sick world. In turn, let us sing a Christmas love song to Him!

Navidad en Medio de la Inflación Económica y la Incertidumbre



Pastor Juan Daniel Villegas

Ya se siente el ambiente navideño, época en la que la abundancia de alimentos, de regalos y los gastos adicionales han sido la constante. Sin embargo, con la incertidumbre económica mundial, vista en una creciente inflación, altos precios de las energías y la incertidumbre de una posible confrontación bélica de gran escala, ¿tendremos el ánimo y la economía para hacer las celebraciones que tradicionalmente se hacían?

Entendiendo que la inflación económica es la pérdida de poder adquisitivo del dinero visto en un encarecimiento de valor de los productos de consumo, de los intereses y otros servicios, lo que conlleva a comprar menos, pero con mayor gasto. Por otro lado, la incertidumbre es un estado de inseguridad o estar a la espera de algo que puede afectar la vida negativamente, generando una sensación de ansiedad.

Para algunos esta navidad será la más fría que han pasado en años, ya sea porque estarán limitados en el uso de comodidades, calefactores, luces, etc., otros estarán fuera de sus hogares, enfrentados a la dura realidad de ser refugiados o inmigrantes. Para todos aquellos que estén en situaciones similares recomiendo dos textos bíblicos que pueden ayudar a levantar fortalecer nuestro espíritu.

El primero de ellos es Isaías 43: 2: “Cuando pases por las aguas, yo estaré contigo; y si por los ríos, no te anegarán. Cuando pases por el fuego, no te quemarás, ni la llama arderá en ti”. Aquí claramente el Señor expresa su amor protector en medio de las dificultades y peligros de la vida diaria, pero debemos tener tranquilidad y entender que Dios aún está al control de la historia humana.

El segundo es del Nuevo Testamento y nos introduce justo a la época de la navidad. Lucas 2:10 – 11: “Pero el ángel les dijo: No temáis; porque he aquí os doy nuevas de gran gozo, que será para todo el pueblo: que os ha nacido hoy, en la ciudad de David, un Salvador, que es CRISTO el Señor”. Con asombro, pero a su vez profunda seguridad, los pastores de aquella región recibieron un mensaje extensivo para toda la humanidad que brindó y brinda esperanza y gozo. ¡Nació el Salvador!, hecho que en cada navidad tenemos la oportunidad de recordar este acto de salvación.

Ya que estamos terminado un año donde las palabras más usadas fueron: crisis, guerra, inflación económica, incertidumbre, recesión y otras más del mismo calibre, un año lleno de nubes grises, tenemos un rayo de luz y esperanza que se abre paso ante el panorama sombrío y recordar en esta navidad que Dios siempre cumple sus promesas, pues envió a su Hijo para salvar al mundo como lo afirma Juan 3:16 y visionando el futuro cuando Jesús vuelva como Rey de Reyes y Señor de Señores a recoger a los suyos y terminar los altos y los bajos de esta humanidad.

Por lo demás y aunque las cosas no han sido fáciles y el porvenir no es alentador, debemos recordar que la navidad es una fecha diferente y especial para compartir alegría, cariño, alimentos y un mensaje que fortalezca el corazón. Para lograr esto quisiera compartir estos consejos para esta navidad:

- Tenga la mejor actitud, sea agradecido por lo que ha recibido. Dios ha sido bueno con usted, mire a su alrededor, agradezca por las bendiciones que tiene y sea consciente del amor de nuestro Dios.

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Wrapped in **WHAT?**



Stacey DePluzer

I distinctly remember the Christmas when my mom, during our annual family gift exchange, handed my cousin this shiny, beautifully wrapped box for him to open. Like most impatient but wildly excited children on Christmas morning, my little cousin ripped the wrapping paper off, threw it somewhere behind himself, and stared with big eyes at the medium sized box in his hands. Eagerly, he took the top of the box off, dug his hands inside and with all the disdain he could muster up, exclaimed "Earmuffs?!", and proceeded to toss his gift to the side. He had assumed, as many of us do, that the packaging would reflect the package itself... and in his mind, earmuffs didn't quite cut it. Well... his perspective on that gift changed pretty quick after about 20 minutes of playing in the snow without anything to keep his ears warm.

I think we often find ourselves doing the same thing as we enter the holiday season. We expect our Christmases to be wrapped

in Christmas carols, holiday sales, and matching pajama sets, because isn't that what anyone would expect on Christmas? Isn't it supposed to be the "most wonderful time of the year?" So, when life throws us a curve ball, or maybe a lump of coal in the form of one less place setting at the table this year, or maybe we've found ourselves laid off right before the holidays, we get upset because "this isn't what we thought Christmas was going to be like this year." It's not what we expected it to be, so we toss it to the side... next year will be better. But what if the most precious gift we could get this Christmas didn't look like what we thought it would?

You know, having their baby born in a stable and having to lay Him in a manger was probably not the way Mary and Joseph imagined welcoming their first-born child, their gift, into the world. Then again, nothing about the way this child came to be was conventional, was it? His earthly context didn't really seem to give much insight into His purpose, but still, His identity and mission, His worth never changed. This baby boy, not born in a palace, yet still born as royalty. Not born surrounded by servants, but as a servant. A child who received wondrous gifts from the Magi, yet coming to give the greatest gift of all. The King of Kings not wrapped in regal, purple satin... but wrapped in swaddling clothes? That doesn't seem like an entrance fit for the Most High, but the angel in Luke 2 tells the shepherds, "This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." The sign wasn't the bright star in the sky or the gifts from the wise men. It was just the baby. It was just Jesus. And you know what? It didn't matter what He was wrapped in. He was perfect. He was enough.

This Christmas, even if your current context might not look like much, or maybe your holiday season is turning out to be more unconventional than you planned, remember that the packaging doesn't always reflect the worth of the gift. I believe that Jesus has something special for you this season, but it might not be the biggest or shiniest package under the tree. Who knows? Maybe it will be a pair of earmuffs. I can promise this one thing, though. Because it's coming from Him, it won't matter what it's wrapped in. It will be perfect. It will be enough.



Merry Christmas!

Grateful Living

STEWARDSHIP CORNER

Globalization is something we experience every day of our lives. There is no land too distant not to be a part of our lives when something happens “there.” News is travelling fast nowadays. We are able to witness the events happening before our eyes in real time.

Although we are probably best informed about the war in Ukraine, due to its scale and geo-political environment, this is by no means the only war happening in 2022. Throughout the year, in different parts of the world, people lost their lives and livelihood due to military conflicts. Families were torn apart, houses were destroyed, people were killed. Although the last battle fought on American soil happened in 1890 (Battle of Wounded Knee), many Americans were affected by other kinds of tragedies: mass shootings, fires, floods, hurricanes. There is always someone, somewhere, for whom the things didn’t go well. For some, a simple “How are you?” is a tough and a heart-wrenching question. As painful and tragic as they are, those events in other lands and other people’s lives give us a perspective on blessings which are a part of our daily life and help



us to appreciate and count our daily blessings. They cause us to be content with the mundane and “uneventful” life we feel we may have...

The end of the year is a good time for stopping in our daily rush and contemplating about all the blessings that have come our way in 2022. Secular consumerism is trying to convince us that the meaning and joy of life is grounded in acquiring yet another new material toy. Christian stewardship is teaching us that it more blessed and joyful to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). One of my prayers is: “Lord, help me to see all your blessings in my life.” I pray this prayer because I strongly believe that a grateful heart is a generous heart. As the 2022 comes to its end, I invite you to pray this prayer with me and to embark with me on a journey of Stewardship, a journey of a Grateful Living!

On behalf of the Illinois Conference, I would like to thank you for your financial support of the Mission of Jesus Christ in the State of Illinois in 2022, as well as for you using your gifts and talents to be a blessing in your local church and community. May God richly bless you in the New 2023.

Stewardship Department



Arkadiusz Bojko,
 Planned Giving and
 Stewardship Consultant

Welcome to the Illinois Conference!

PASTOR ALEXANDER RAMIREZ-MORENO

Rockford Church

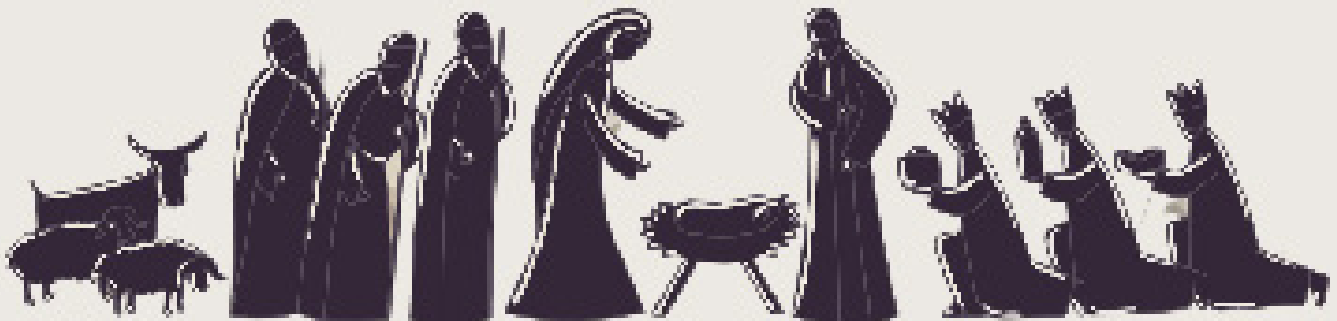
“Fifteen years ago when I came to this country, I started working delivering food in downtown Chicago, then colporteur in Miami, talking about Jesus’ love all over Texas, pastoring in California, and serving in the ARMY as a Chaplain. And who would have thought? ...Back to Illinois to tell the Story of Jesus serving in the Rockford area. We, Valeria, Andre, Patricia and Alex; are happy to be here!”



“

There is just
so much more
beyond my sight.

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Navidad en Medio de la Inflación Económica y la Incertidumbre

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- Compre con buen juicio y precaución, no malgaste el dinero, pregúntese lo siguiente antes de comprar: ¿realmente lo necesito? o ¿este artículo es una necesidad real de la familia o puede esperar?

- Aunque suene contradictorio, comparta con otras personas algunos regalos o alimentos, especialmente con las familias grandes y de escasos recursos. Recuerde que es más feliz dar que recibir.

- Dé una ofrenda especial de navidad para la iglesia, esto hace parte de la adoración al Dios que todo lo da.

No permita que se apague el verdadero espíritu de la navidad, conserve la fe, animémonos unos a otros, brinde amor y simpatía, pues ¡muy pronto alzaremos nuestros ojos y veremos venir a nuestro Señor Jesucristo en gloria!

Feliz navidad y que Dios siga llenando su casa de bendición.



*Happy
Holidays!*

More than Our Eyes

Continued from page 1

Stars above would never be gazed upon the same. Shepherds now had a place at their table. Truly, their eyes would never be sufficient. To see amidst their daily lives the eternal would require their whole being.

I think of our students in our classrooms. I think of our teachers who serve day-in-and-day-out. I think of our pastors in our districts. I think of the families of all who serve and sacrifice. I think of our congregational ministry people who show up to support the ministry of the church. I think of our AdventHealth Great Lakes Region partners who daily seek to bring the healing ministry of this child. There is just so much more beyond my sight. And Christmas brings this truth to 3-D reality: the ordinary becomes extraordinary because of a baby.

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