

It used to be Children's LETTERS to Santa Claus. Nowadays it's Children's E-MAILS to Santa. Here are some actual emails that have been sent to the North Pole.

"I'm sorry, Santa," says Jon, age 7, "but we don't have a chimney. I'll leave the cat flap unlocked for you, but please -- watch out for the litter box!" Good advice.

Christian, age 8, writes: "Mommy and Daddy say I have not been very good these past few days. How bad can I be before I lose my presents?" Good question.

Rosanne, age 11, is a budding evangelist. She wrote to Santa, "Do you know that JESUS is the real reason for Christmas? Not to be mean," she continues, "but He is."

Bruce, age 7, writes, "I'm sorry for putting all that Ex-lax in your milk last year, but I wasn't sure you were real. But I don't understand why my DAD got really mad."

And finally, did you know that there is a new Christmas tradition of eating Eggs Benedict on hubcaps? Know why? Are you ready for this? SURE?! (Sing) "Oh, there's no place like CHROME for the hollandaise." Hey, I warned you!

Our gospel focuses on Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. First, a bit of background on the text. We are told that Gabriel was sent to Nazareth. This emphasizes how God reaches out into the lowly, the backwater, the one-camel town, rather than mighty Jerusalem, the place of the temple, power and money. We are told that Mary was engaged to Joseph. The betrothal period was often a year, and Jewish tradition suggests that couples in Galilee were not left unchaperoned during that time. Betrothal involved a financial agreement between the families, and it could be ended only by divorce or death. It concluded with the wedding night, at which point the marriage could finally be consummated physically. Because the royal line was through the father, and Joseph was of the house of David, any legal son of Joseph would belong to David's royal line. This is how Jesus is called in the scriptures 'son of David.'

Mary is addressed as 'full of grace,' or 'highly favored one.' This is unusual, especially to a person of low status. Given the usual age of marriage for Galilean virgins, Mary was likely in her midteens; her age, her gender and her being a Galilean villager together would have given her little social standing. Mary is told "The Lord is with you," an assurance often included in divine announcements, including when God was calling someone to a difficult task.

God had promised David an eternal lineage and being adopted as God's children, but David's royal line no longer ruled. From the stump of this line, however, would come an eternal ruler, as in Is 11:1, where we are told "a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." Jesse was the father of David, so this is the one who will reign on David's throne eternally.

Mary is told that the Holy Spirit will 'overshadow' her, a word that evokes the image of God's glory, as when God's glory filled the tabernacle. Mary's response to the angel says "Behold, I am the handmaid (or servant) of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." This signifies her compliance or gratitude, including in addressing God or angels. (all taken from CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1755-1756)

OK, so what. Why is Mary so significant to us as Christians?

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Mary is the pre-eminent example of the one who hears the word of God – and keeps it. For this reason, more than because of biological motherhood, Jesus claims her as His mother. Giving birth to Christ is something more than biological. The early church called Mary THEOTOKOS, ‘the God-bearer.’ This is also the task of all who are baptized. We are to bring Christ-God into the world. We are to give birth. But how do we do this?

Looking at how Mary gave birth to Christ, we see that it’s not something that’s done in an instant. Faith, like biology, also relies on a process that has a number of distinct, organic moments. And note that it is a PROCESS. We can never say we are finished with the ongoing conversion that true spirituality and faith demand. If we just say “I always did it this way,” we are missing the whole point. What are these ongoing moments or movements? What is the process by which we give birth to faith in the world? And we need to note that ALL of the stages require change. Remember, change, conversion is at the heart of the gospel – it is not an optional component.

First, like Mary, we need to get pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We need to let the word take such root in us that it begins to become part of our actual flesh. This requires an openness, a willingness to be led in a different direction than we had imagined.

Then, like any woman who’s pregnant, we have to lovingly gestate, nurture, and protect what is growing inside us until it’s sufficiently strong so that it can live on its own, outside us. This process, gestation, as we know, is often accompanied by nausea, morning sickness, and a stretching of the flesh that permanently scars the body. In other words, it COSTS. All true love, all discipleship, comes with a cost. If we think because we come to church, we should be exempt from suffering, we’ve missed the whole point! Even Jesus suffered! He told us if we were to be His disciples, we too had to pick up the cross and follow in His footsteps.

Eventually, of course, we must give birth. What we have nurtured and grown inside of us must, when it is ready, be given birth outside. This is a painful process. There is no painless way to give birth.

Birth, however, is only the beginning of motherhood. Mary gave birth to a baby, but she had to spend years nurturing, coaxing, and cajoling that infant into adulthood. The infant in the crib at Bethlehem is not yet the Christ who preaches, heals, and dies for us. Every mother needs to give birth twice, once biologically and once in faith, once to an infant and once to an adult. The same is true in our faith life. We cannot go around saying “I learned in 3rd grade” or “my teacher taught me in 7th grade....” What we knew then may have been wonderful for that moment in our life. I always wonder if they have learned anything since! But an adult faith requires dealing with adult reality, and the fact that things do not always remain the same. Children don’t remain children all their lives unless they fail to grow up. It’s also true in our faith life. To become an adult disciple of Christ means a willingness to lay down our own thoughts, plans, and ways of doing things. It’s not easy work, and it is further complicated if we are stubborn.

Finally, motherhood has still one more phase. As her child grows, matures, and takes on a personality and destiny of their own, the mother, at a point, must ponder (as Mary did). She must let herself be painfully stretched in understanding, in not knowing, in carrying tension, in letting go. She must set free to be themselves something that was once so fiercely hers. The pains of childbirth are often gentle compared to this second wrenching. This is what Mary went through to give Christ to the world: pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, gestation of that into a child inside of her; pain in birthing that to the outside; nurturing that new life into adulthood, and pondering, painfully letting go so that this new life can be its own, not hers.

Mary heard the Word of God – and kept it. Her “Let it be done to me according to your word,” was a lifelong process.

And in this, Mary prefers our imitation, not admiration. Our task too is to give birth to Christ. Mary is the paradigm for doing that. From her we get the pattern: Let the word of God take root and make us pregnant; gestate that by giving it the nourishing sustenance of our own life; submit to the pain that is demanded for it to be born to the outside; give up our own plans and ways of doing things, and then spend our lives coaxing it from infancy to adulthood; and finally, during and after all of this, do some pondering, accepting the pain of not understanding – and of letting go.

Christmas is not automatic. It cannot be taken for granted. It began with Mary, but each of us is asked to make our own contribution to giving birth to Christ in the world. May we make Mary’s prayer our own – “Let it be done to me according to your Word. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 7 Dec 2003)