

**December 24, 2007**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
**Dr. Lewis F. Galloway**

### **Christmas Eve Meditation**

We have counted the candles; we have lived in anticipation; we have planned our gifts, our celebrations and our travel; we have spent our money. Now we come to the fulfillment of all this preparation and this time of longing. Tomorrow we open our gifts, we feast until we are filled and drowsy; we spend time with family and friends. No sooner do we celebrate the birth of Jesus, Savior of the world, the great good news of Christmas, than we think it is all over. We are ready to clean up the kitchen, pack up the decorations, take down the tree, throw out the trash and go back to business as usual. After tomorrow, we face the Christmas letdown.

We think the waiting is all over; the time is passed. But we have it all wrong. The birth of Jesus is not the end of our waiting. It is the beginning of true anticipation.

It would seem that for Mary of all people at the birth of Jesus the time of waiting and anticipation would be over. Her baby is born. The Messiah is come. Luke tells us that his birth marks the beginning not the end of anticipation. When Mary hears what the shepherds have to say about all that they have seen and heard, she holds onto their words like a treasure. She clutches them to her breast. She keeps them in her heart and ponders their meaning. The reflection doesn't end when Mary and Joseph pack up the baby things and return to their home or when they grab what they can and flee into Egypt to escape Herod. When Jesus is found as a young boy in the temple with a wisdom beyond his years, Luke tells us that Mary ponders the meaning of these things too. When Jesus begins his ministry and gathers the disciples around him, Mary keeps wondering what it all means and where it will all lead. When she hears reports that he is out of his mind and she and her other children go to get him, Mary hears him say that he has a much larger family than just the ones with whom he grew up. Everyone who has faith is a part of his family. When Mary stands at the foot of the cross, the waiting became heavy and full of anguish. When Jesus cries out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," she wonders what that means too. When she hears the news of the empty tomb, everything she has ever thought about his life, her life and the life of the world is seen in a new light. No, the birth of Jesus is not the end of her anticipation. It is the beginning of life, pondering the mystery of God's ways among us.

Before we pack up the decorations and throw out the tree, before we give into the Christmas letdown, we are invited to see the birth of Jesus not as an end, but as a beginning of a new way of thinking. We too are invited to ponder the mystery of God's presence. The root of the word, ponder, means to bring together into one's mind different things so that these things may be understood in light of each another. The birth of Jesus begins for us a lifelong process of seeing our lives in the light of Christ.

Dr. John Wimmer, program director in the religion division of the Lilly Endowment, tells of discovering after his father's death his dad's WWII journal. His father grew up on an Indiana farm and spent a number of years in the Pacific theater in the army during the Second World War. In his journal he wrote about experiences that he never shared much with his family during his life. He wrote of his experiences playing in the army band, but also of the days of boredom, the endless waiting in line for food, the carnage he saw as a stretcher bearer, the pervasive and crude profanity that troubled his simple Methodist heart. In his journal, he described one particular night of terror when he was in his bunk along with 500 men trapped in the ship below the water line. He heard the ship's anti-aircraft guns roar. He knew that if the Kamikaze pilot made a target of his ship, the men would never get out of the single hatch in time. He prepared to die. Instead of hitting his ship, the pilot crashed his plane into a sister ship and more than 400 men died.

He spent his time of waiting and anticipation in the light of Christ. He brought together in his mind and heart his faith in Christ and the waste and terror of war, the suffering of the people of New Guinea and the Philippines, his own fear of death and his longing to be "back home again in Indiana." Like Mary, he pondered these things from the perspective of

God. As John writes of his father, “His faithfulness to God and the church were forged in the furnace of the war experience. (He and mom sang in the church choir for 50 years.) I can now see that he became... ‘enlarged by waiting’ – more kind, humble and truthful; more faithful and devoted” (*Agony in Advent*, *The Christian Century*, November 27, 2007, p. 9).

This anticipation of Christmas is training for our lives as Christians. We live all year and every year as a people of hope, pondering the mystery of our lives in the light of the mystery of Christ’s birth. As John Wimmer puts it, “We wait, and hope that our faith is enlarged into the largess of God’s great love even as God comes to meet us.” (Ibid.)

This Christmas we ponder – that is – we bring together into our minds the paradoxes of life:

The birth of the prince of peace in a world that is still at war.

The gift of God’s priceless child in a world that still does not value children.

The holy family that has so little, and yet so much, and families that have so much, and yet so little.

No, it is not all over. A lifetime of anticipation is just beginning. God is doing great things in our lives if we are patient enough to anticipate these things and patient enough to keep them in our hearts and ponder their meaning.