

*CRIBB<S>NOTE – December 20, 2009*

Christmas is not only for children. It is about pregnant women and women prophets. It is about a woman too old to conceive and another woman who was a very young virgin. Christmas celebrates the fullness of life and the realization of God's immeasurable love for the world.

There are debates about the origins of Christmas. As a cultural holiday, people point to the Pagan festivals and carnal activities associated with worship of the Moon, stars and Sun by early civilizations. There was the German influence that transported many of the symbols we recognize today during this holiday season.

Its arrival into the United States brought great contention as Puritans and Presbyterians rejected any celebration of Christmas. They held staunch opposition to the holiday in part because of their antipathy toward the Roman Catholic Church and later their rejection of British domination over the newly settled colonies.

They believed Christmas promoted Catholicism on the one hand and, on the other, was another imposition furthered by England before the American Revolution. In fact, George Washington launched a major assault on Christmas Day 1777 during the Battle of Trenton. It was nearly a century later before President Ulysses S. Grant made Christmas a federal holiday in 1875.

But, it is the religious significance of Christmas that continues to resound in every corner of the world. Although it is not believed that December 25 was the actual birth date of Jesus of Nazareth, that day does commemorate the remarkable event exactly nine months after the Annunciation on March 25.

That was when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth and told her she would become mother to the Son of God.

The story of Mary's encounter with Gabriel is found in the Book of Luke. There, we read of her joyful reaction and bewilderment. The miracle of Christmas is told in varying ways to expound on the extraordinary events that led to Jesus' birth. Of course, there are corresponding arguments among scholars and agnostics pertaining to the actual facts regarding Mary, the Virgin Mother, and Jesus, the Son of God.

Christmas is a story about pregnant women and women prophets. Mary leaves her hometown and travels on a dangerous journey to the hill country of Judea to talk with her elder cousin, Elizabeth, who also had an encounter with an angel. Like Mary, Elizabeth was pregnant with a boy who would grow up to become the messenger who would proclaim the coming of Christ.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home, there are more than two women on the scene. There are four people accounted for in the story.

. In her old age, Elizabeth is already six months pregnant with her son, John. Elizabeth hears Mary's voice and the unborn baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps with joy. He already signals the coming of Jesus who travels in the womb of Mary. Two pregnant women and two unborn babies launch history in a progressive direction that continues to this day.

Christmas is a season and much more than a single day. It is a time of receiving God's greatest gift to the world. Divine Love is made flesh and comes with a proclamation of peace and hope.

Immediately, Mary greets Elizabeth and breaks into song. She sings the glorious words we now call the "Magnificat!" She accepts the joys and trials of motherhood. She sings of God's amazing choice of a "lowly servant" to bring forth Immanuel, God with us, into the world. Her song is prophetic and beautiful. The Song of Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God in my Savior."

There is great excitement between Mary and Elizabeth in that moment of intimate sharing and ecstasy. They have been blessed by God with gifts for the human race. Elizabeth is glad as she says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women."

Long before shopping sprees and greeting cards, there were two pregnant women who faced the most unusual circumstances and honored God with the sacred sacrifices of their bodies and their lives. The depth of Christmas in Christendom is deeper than commercial exploitation and meaningless consumerism. It is the celebration of life and love from which true understanding brings forth real peace.

This Christmas, let us give thanks for Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptizer, whose lives were slaughtered but whose Truth and Spirit live eternally. Their births brought joy to the world and a path toward human goodness that can be achieved when we think and act to secure a higher quality of life for others. Christmas means putting God first and service above self.

Merry Christmas!