



*A Message from Mark!*  
**The Christmas  
Riddle!**

25 December 2009 - Christmas Day  
Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

God comes to us every Christmas as a human baby, dependent and vulnerable; needing, just to survive, not only food and shelter, but someone to open their hearts to that baby, or it will die. God enters our messy, sometimes shameful, certainly unprepared existence; asking, like any human baby, for our love; asking to be part of our lives.

The Christmas stories always leave us perplexed, with some puzzling questions – riddles. Why would God send Jesus on a mission to save the world without doing more to ensure his safety, much less success? If I were God, surely I'd have arranged things at least, so that the head of state was a bit more sympathetic to our cause.

Or, how about this riddle: Why does God intervene in human affairs at all? Why does God care? And that's the greatest riddle of all, the riddle of God's grace. That God keeps on coming to us, just when it seems we have no hope and no room left for love – then tada! He's here. And when confronted with such mind-challenging love, what is left but to fall, like confused magi, on our knees.

The riddle of Christmas – What continues to astound us is that our life, so ragged around the edges, with everything and nothing, so inelegant and unprepared, is also the place abounding in God's grace.

The riddle of this Christmas is that God is even now entering our world:  
Continuing to come, in endless refugee disguise;  
Concealed in those we have never forgiven;  
Popping up in the midst of our deepest grief and fear;  
Secreted in the hearts of people we despise;  
Surprising us in a sudden joyful memory or a phrase of music;  
Found in the rejected and unacceptable;  
Hiding among the ones we ignore and criticize;  
Waiting even now for us to open our hearts.

I hope you will today, and may your Christmas celebrations be holy and joyous!

**Amen! Thanks be to God!!**

*This sermon was preached by Rev Mark J Dunn at  
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Have you ever noticed that we have a talkative angel in the Christmas story? Most angels in the Bible are a rather taciturn lot, one or two phrases at most and then only when pressed. But Mary's angel, Gabriel is almost extroverted. "*Hail Mary*". And when he tells her his message, she thinks it's a riddle. "*How can this be?*" So he replies with what can hardly be called a transparent answer to her question. Perhaps angels often talk in riddles.

What did one angel say to the other angel? *Halo there!*

Riddles have been around for centuries. A riddle is a traditional question with an unexpected answer - a verbal puzzle. God posed a riddle to Moses. Sampson posed a riddle for the Philistines. Jesus posed a riddle for the disciples, "*who are my mother and my brothers?*" And if the Virgin Birth isn't riddle enough for you, I have another one.

MD: What Christmas Carol is a favorite of parents?  
*Plant: I don't know.*  
MD: Silent Night.

Do you have any Christmas Riddles?

*Plant: What did Adam say on the day before Christmas?*  
MD: I don't know, What did Adam say on the day before Christmas?  
*Plant: It's Christmas, Eve.*

MD: What do you have in December that you don't have in any other month?

**Plant:** *I don't know.* MD: D

**Plant:** *If athletes get athletes foot, what do astronauts get?*

MD: I don't know. What do Astronauts get?

**Plant:** *Missile toe!*

Riddles are everywhere and we'll all have to endure a few more when we crack our Christmas bon bons at lunch. Disputed legend has it that "*The 12 days of Christmas*" began as an ancient riddle song, adapted and changed to its present form when it was illegal to be a Roman Catholic in England during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In order to teach young Catholics their catechism, they made up a nonsense song, which was in fact a coded message.

"*On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me...*" = God gave to the church:

- A partridge in a pear tree: Jesus on the cross (a mother partridge feigns injury to create a decoy to predators, thus giving her life for her nestlings. And the fruit tree is like that in the Garden of Eden.
- 2 Turtle doves: the old and new testaments
- 3 French hens: faith, hope and love
- 4 calling birds: the 4 gospels
- 5 golden rings: the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible
- 6 geese a laying: the six days of creation
- 7 swans are the gifts of the spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.
- 8 milking maids are the beatitudes
- 9 ladies dancing are the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

- 10 lords are the 10 commandments
- 11 pipers are the **faithful** apostles
- 12 drummers are the beliefs stated in the Apostles Creed:

Our Christmas story tells us that God comes to us as a baby, born to poor, unmarried parents; birthed in a smelly stable; and laid on prickly straw. This is not a picture perfect family; not a home decked with beauty; no cosy bassinet with new blankets here. God comes as a human baby. Even Aardvarks are more able to take care of themselves at birth than human babies. Human babies arrive dependent and vulnerable, and **THAT** is what has presented us with a riddle for 2 millennia. ***When is a king not a king? When is the omnipotent powerless? What is out of time and just in time?***

Some of us get stuck on the Virgin birth. Some think that that is the main riddle; but the word originally means **a mature young woman**. It's worth noting that Mark, Peter, Paul and John do not ever seem to have heard of a conjugally challenged birth. The Jews had a saying that in the birth of every child there were three partners, the father, the mother and the Spirit of God. Perhaps Joseph didn't, for a moment, believe this "*pregnancy by the Holy Spirit*" bit. But then that talkative angel shows up again, and Joseph is able to transcend his cultural disdain and moral outrage, his sense of shame and personal betrayal. As a result of his talk with an angel, the story tells us, Joseph changes his mind. He opens his heart to Mary and to Jesus. If Joseph hadn't changed his heart the story would have ended quite differently.

It is the same with Mary. Hers is not a predestined life. She is not some princess refined by centuries of breeding and raised to fulfill her destiny. This is not a divine manifesto: **'God says you will bear a baby! So there!'**

No, the Angel is presenting Mary with a challenge, a choice: ***Would you like to be part of God's great plan? In spite of the fear and shame, Will you open your heart to this baby?*** Then Mary said, "***Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***"