God’s Odd Cast of Characters

During this season of the year we often see or help stage plays based on the narrative of the nativity found in Luke’s gospel. This story is so familiar to us that we don’t often consider the cast of characters within the play—some of which are not actually found in the scriptural account—for example, there is no inn keeper denying them a room mentioned in the text. Some of our enactments begin with the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary; others begin with the couple already established around the infant in a cradle-like manger. We know the story so well we don’t consider the choice of a young peasant girl’s involvement in the coming of the one who is to rule Israel as strange—we celebrate with her the favor given by God to the lowly. We rarely even notice Joseph in the scene, this man who is given the task of raising the child, as he stands quietly looking down. We stand amazed at the idea of God incarnate, but don’t think about the fact that an infant is so very vulnerable and the task of raising a divine being is done by an ordinary man and a young peasant girl. Manger scenes are a very popular decoration at Christmas as well—and the figures gathered around the scene compose a rather unique cast of characters. I have a collection of nativity scenes—some very miniature, some larger—and depending upon the origin of the scene the characters may differ in appearance which reflect the origin and background of the artist. Also the place in which Jesus was born may very well look different. But those individuals gathered remain the same: the holy family itself, the presence of some animals, and the shepherds and the wise men. The cast at the manger has become commonplace for us, but does it ever occur to you how odd this assortment of people really is? When you think about it, only God would bring together a teenage mother and her fiancé, several smelly shepherds, sheep, cows, donkeys and foreign stargazers to witness to what God was doing. That is really quite a motley crew. The couple is in a small village called Bethlehem not their hometown of Nazareth because of Joseph’s family association with king David. Jesus is born to two young people who are barely together in a marriage which had a rocky beginning where the man, a righteous man, according to Matthew decided to continue the marriage instead of “quietly dissolving the contract.” They have journeyed to Bethlehem because of a Roman decree that all be registered, so the small village is crowed. We imagine the very pregnant Mary riding on a donkey—not mentioned in scripture. Because of the reference to the manger where the newborn was laid we easily add in some cattle and perhaps some sheep, but there are others which scripture does tell us came to visit this newborn child. Angels have announced to shepherds in the surrounding countryside that something miraculous which they need to see has happened. So we have the shepherds coming with their sheep—shepherds who were among the lowest of the low—dirty and poor—living outside the bounds of society for months at a time. Most manger scenes and Christmas plays have the Magi or Wise Men arriving shortly after the local shepherds, although scripture indicates they would have shown up about two years after the event. Within this scene you have characters that span ages, countries, economics and politics. Around this child, there exists the heavenly and the earthbound. There are teenagers and adults, people and animals. There are those who are outcasts and those who are friends of kings. There are those who are wealthy and those who are poor. The group that assembles around Jesus at the nativity reveals the extraordinary diversity of God’s people—those whom God chooses to reveal what has been accomplished through this birth. The passage from Luke that was read this morning continues adding to those to whom this revelation of God’s in-breaking into the world is given. Our text begins with the information that as a devout Jewish couple they are beginning their responsibility as parents by following Jewish Law. When the child is eight days old, according to the Law he is circumcised and given the name provided by Gabriel. Also according to Jewish Law there are two more rituals the faithful do after the birth of a child. Forty days after the birth, the woman must offer a sacrifice to wash away the uncleanness caused by the birth. The firstborn male of any species is declared to be dedicated to God unless a ransom is paid. Since Bethlehem is close to Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph took their offerings and went to the Temple to perform their duty. While they are there we meet two more individuals: Simeon and Anna, both of whom have been waiting for many years to see the Messiah. It is easy to understand how the shepherds recognized Jesus, after all an angel and a heavenly host had appeared to them. The same logic applies to the Magi—they saw a new star and followed it to Palestine, only stopping in Jerusalem because their expectations were that a king should be born in a palace. But what allowed both Simeon and Anna to so quickly recognize Jesus as the Messiah?

They are given absolutely no obvious outward sign. This tiny baby has shared no words of wisdom with them. He has not healed anyone or walked on water or anything out of the ordinary yet. Mary and Joseph’s appearance in the Temple with their infant son is an everyday occurrence for faithful Jews honoring their traditions. What clues do we have from our passage that might help us with this question? The descriptions of them given by Luke seem to me to provide an answer. Simeon and Anna were not exactly tourists in the temple. Luke describes Simeon as “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him.” Simeon was expectantly looking for and open to God’s visitation. Anna is described as a prophet who since her widowhood has lived in the Temple fasting and praying night and day. These are two individuals who are not exactly part-time in their commitment to God. They have both diligently prepared f lifetime for a moment such as this, for a revelation of God in their midst, even in the form of a tiny little baby. They had prepared their hearts and minds, their eyes and ears, their whole beings were committed to being in relationship with God. If they were stringed instruments, their strings would have been perfectly tuned to the pitch of the divine. They both recognized what was happening in their midst and the deep implications. There were probably many others in the Temple that day, others who had not prepared their hearts and minds to be in tune with God. Because Simeon and Anna have prepared their whole lives for a miracle to appear before them, for the savior to be revealed in their midst, they recognize Jesus. Day after ordinary day they prepared for the presence of God. When it happens they recognize it immediately and know exactly how to respond. Most of the rest of us have not spent enough time and concentration to allow ourselves to see the miracle of God’s presence in our midst. A friend of mine once pointed out that before every single performance of the symphony each of the members will tune their instrument. In all that sound, there is no way to detect what music will be played, but after tuning under the leadership of the conductor beautiful music is heard. In some ways that describes our role in God’s plan. As the claimed and sent body of Christ, we need to tune our instruments, to listen to the sounds we make and tune them to resonate with the teachings of our Lord. Playing an instrument requires much practice, a great deal of concentration. Without practice, preparation and tuning the sounds are not musical. I think preparing ourselves to discern God in our world; to be expectant of God’s arrival in our midst involves at the very least the same time and concentration that it takes to play an instrument. If we do not prepare and expect to see how God is working in our world, we will miss it. We are also likely to miss the part which God desires of us. God gathered a very diverse crowd around the infant; to some the revelation was unexpected and difficult to ignore. The news was given in signs impossible to miss. But the revelation to these last two individuals who have seen the baby Jesus and immediately knew what God had done came because they were expectantly watching to see how and where God would act. Creating some time in every ordinary day to listen for God is a good first step for us. To include in our daily prayers not just petitions, but some listening time expecting God to be present. Our relationship with God needs to be included on our list of priorities among all those other daily tasks. It is not likely that we will be found here in the sanctuary praying night and day, but we do need to find time for our relationship with God every day. Like any relationship, if it is not given attention and energy, it cannot be healthy. But God so loved the world that God’s own son came and dwelled among us, so if we turn to God expectantly seeking to draw closer in that relationship we can be sure God will be waiting for us. In this season of Christmas and beyond, let us turn toward our God with expectant hearts and minds; keeping our eyes peeled for signs of God’s miraculous presence in our midst. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.