

“Cast and Location Scouting”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

Luke 2:1–20

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(entering the room and looking around) This is a lovely setting, I think it can work, and you look like lovely people, we may be able to use some of you, and (looking at the tree) – wow, would you look at that? I’ve never seen a tree that big inside a building! Someone fed that thing well, a bit too well, in fact. We may have to cut it back. Nothing grows that big in the rocky soil of Bethlehem, and we’ll have to find a place to locate the cave. Perhaps this area down here, it is a baptistry, isn’t it? You are a Baptist church? We could turn that into a cave...

Oh, I see, you think of an animal shed or barn behind an inn as the place where Jesus is born, and that’s OK, it is an image that makes sense to you. But the word translated as “inn” means “lodging place” and where people lodged was in caves of stone because they had a lot of it. Not many trees with which to build sheds and barns but lots of stones, like Raleigh, in fact, though you have the trees too in the City of Oaks.

Anyway, in this new film we are shooting, we are going for realism, using the best scholarly insights. It’s fine for you to envision the sacred story in your own terms. Christ comes for all of us, and for each of us in our own particular settings, but in this production, we are going for historical accuracy, as much as possible, and it’s my job scout out these things. I do think this room can work. It has been used in films before – in “Palm Sunday” produced by your own Patrick Nichols and in “The Ties that Bind” produced by Diana Newton. This room looks good on the big screen, like *some* of you...

But to that point, I’m not only scouting out the location, I am looking for cast members, we will need a lot of locals to help. We will need quite a few shepherds, and some of you look the part... and smell it too... We will need some angels, I don’t know about that, though perhaps... yes... some of you may do, with a little make-up and

costuming and a lot of coaching! We don't really need any wise guys, or gals for that matter, though you seem to have *them* in abundance! But Jesus is a little older when the Magi come along. If we decide to include that part of the story, it will be an entirely different scene.

Anyway, I think you can help with all of this, but the biggest challenge we have comes with casting one role – Mary. This is the role we have to get right and it is the most difficult to cast. She is so young and innocent, yet so wise and aware. She seems almost passive at times, more a viewer of this story than a central character, but she is not. How does someone convey this with only a few words here and there, other than her song; mostly with facial expressions, body language, presence?

And what does Mary feel? We might think joy, and gratitude, perhaps wonder, awe – all these emotions are there – but mostly what she feels is fear. Like shepherds who are told by angels to fear not because they are afraid, Mary is utterly terrified! Childbirth is terrifying, especially in this time, glorious and life-giving but also violent and dangerous for mother and child. But being part of the Divine plan for the salvation of the world is also humbling, to say the least, what with angels whizzing about left and right. This is anything but ordinary!

And Mary doesn't even know how this is going to work, thank God! Jesus will be put to death in his early thirties because imperfect people like us can't stand someone like him coming along and making us look bad, a man full of pure love, utterly devoted to justice, no matter who is threatened, and a man who won't fight back. We can't allow someone like that to keep center stage long, he will change everything, which he does anyway, God has a way of using even his death.

But what all this means is that Jesus must die... like Harry Potter, Jesus must die. If Mary had known this, that her darling boy would die at such a young age in such a cruel way, would she have gone through with the birth? What do parents do today when they learn that their child will only live a short time in a painful way? Is it worth it?

Fortunately, Mary is spared this level of fear for now, but she is still plenty terrified, as are all who follow Jesus in the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love and sacrificial service. We need someone with the ability to convey this in an authentic and compelling way.

We also need someone to convey Mary's response. At the end of the story, when she has spent every ounce of energy she has getting this child into the world, in the back of a stone cave where the animals are kept, with all the smells we can imagine yet also the glorious energy of new life, the shepherds come in and tell their tale. Angels have appeared to them, saying they have good news of great joy for all people. This day a Savior is born in the city of David, the Messiah, the Lord! He will be wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, and he will bring peace. Even in her delirious state, vacillating between exhaustion and euphoria, Mary can put two and two together, her son is this Messiah.

So, how does she respond? With excitement, joy? With singing and exhortation? Everyone there is amazed! The shepherds depart glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen. But Mary treasures all these words and ponders them in her heart. That may seem a bit subdued, too casual, like saying, "No, throw that ten-pound bass back, I have caught bigger fish." I gave birth to the Messiah, oh nice...

But the truth is Mary's response makes perfect sense. Singing and rejoicing is appropriate, but the scope of this sacred mystery is more than any human being can take in. As the deepest grief takes time to process, so does the greatest joy. We are talking about a Savior for the world, One who will bring a way for peace. And it begins with God taking on human flesh, coming into the world as a fragile child, born in the back of a cave, among common people and ordinary animals. Have we even begun to appreciate the significance of this even now - the very idea of incarnation, Emmanuel, solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, the beginning of a story that will turn everything upside down?!

Can any of you convey all this? It's a lot to ask, I know, but we'll find someone. Filmmaking is storytelling really, and what a story this is, what a privilege to tell and experience. Glory to God, indeed! Treasuring and pondering seem like the most appropriate responses.

(exiting) I think this place will work for the film, and we can use these people. And somehow, this fits. Jesus comes for all the world, every place and every person. If God could enter the world in the back of cave among animals and shepherds in a time before electricity and indoor plumbing as we know them, surely we can make all of this work!