It has been said that the human race is differentiated from all other species because we are a people of stories. We engage ourselves and each other with stories, if for no other reason, than because we don’t always know how the story will turn out. We subconsciously put ourselves into the stories we listen to and see. We become part of the story, or we find connecting to the story irresistible.

If you think that is not so, you simply have to look at the reports from “Star Wars: The Force Awakens.” The film is expected to rake in upwards of $250 million dollars this weekend alone. And the word is, if you have seen the movie, keep your mouth shut. Those who have yet to see it don’t want to know anything about it – don’t want the story spoiled – because we want to immerse ourselves in it.

Now, to be honest, go back the better part of 40 years, back to May 25, 1977, when the very first Star Wars movie was released, and it was the same thing. Oh, some of you weren’t there. What a pity! It was unlike anything seen before. The story, the cinematography, the simple theme of good versus evil being played out on an intergalactic scale – it completely enveloped the world.

There is, of course, another story being played out this week. Perhaps it needs a John Williams’ score and some words printed on a screen: “Long, long ago in a Galilee far, far away.” The story of the birth of Jesus – and the stories that lead up to it – are at center stage in the life of the Church and world this week. It’s all being told again.
And yet, even with the biggest celebration the Church can offer, there will be nowhere near as many people in every Christian Church this week, as there will be in movie theaters around the world, watching “The Force Awakens.” I’m not despondent about that. But it does make us ask the question, “why?” Why are the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth not as engaging and inspiring as the stories streaming from George Lucas’ imagination?

Part of the answer must surely be that we’ve been telling the story for much longer than 40 years. The stories of Jesus’ birth have been around for two millennium. They have been told, and told, and told – they have been filmed, and filmed, and filmed. They have been taught well and not so well. They have become – heaven help us – familiar.

No only that, they have been domesticated. There’s nothing wild about the stories at all, any more. When we hear the stories of Jesus’ birth, we don’t hear the scandal, the humiliation, the dishonor the original audience must surely have heard. We are not outraged, or angered, or offended the way the original audiences must surely have been.

We have made of these stories lovely little vignettes. We turn them into little works of art and sit them on our mantles and surround them with pine and poinsettias. We dress our children up and put them in little nativity plays, not because we really want them to know the stories in their rawness, but because they just look so darned cute!

We can’t even use certain words that would be used in telling the story in any other setting. We use the word “pregnant” about women all the time, these days. But, have you ever noticed that Mary was never “pregnant?” In the King James’ version, Mary was “great with child.” Isn’t that nice? Even in the New Revised Standard Version, Mary is “expecting a child.” Can’t we say that Mary was “pregnant,” or is that just too earthy, too unsophisticated, too vulgar too crude?

The story of Christmas – of Jesus’ birth – has become cute, charming, and endearing. There is no surprise left in it. We have stripped it of all that is shocking and disturbing.

But it is still a wild and wildly absurd story. It is a story that should still inspire joy, and amazement, and folly, and danger. That is especially true of the story of Mary and Elizabeth.

Instead of an announcement of the coming of the Messiah being heralded by archangels, or high priests, or emperors, or any of the cast of characters you might expect for such an proclamation, the story begins with two marginalized, peasant, pregnant women – one young, poor and unwed, the other far beyond the age to conceive – meeting in a town in the hill country of Judea to celebrate and commiserate about their unexpected and somewhat miraculous pregnancies.
Even when we don’t – or can’t – hear it anymore, Mary and Elizabeth get it and they rejoice in it. God is turning the world upside down! Nothing is going to be as it once was! And because they are open to seeing it and hearing it and being a part of it, Mary and Elizabeth can celebrate it!

God is about to act on behalf of his people, the people who have received his mercy again and again. God will act in strength and power to set things right. The haughty and proud will be confused and scattered in their own imaginations. The powerful will be brought low and the lowly and the poor will be lifted up. The hungry will receive satisfaction and the rich will be consigned to the sidelines.

There is the story in all its wildness and absurdity! There is the good news told in a way that sets the record straight! God is about to act for justice and righteousness and peace and love and joy! God is turning the world upside down and God is doing it through two powerless women and the equally powerless infants they are about to bring into the world.

These two yet-to-be-born children will topple the Roman Empire. They will impact human history forever. They will change the way the world understands itself and its relationship to God. They will challenge people for thousands of years to live a different kind of life. They will inspire the sacrifice and service of billions. They will torment the afflicter and comfort the afflicted.

And the one who will be called Jesus will show us God’s truest face. He will be God-with-us – God-in-flesh. In him, we will see who God is and what God is all about. He will open the door for us to enter into the truest and deepest relationship with God that can be experienced. He will demonstrate for us to see and emulate the life God intended for us to live.

Now, I suppose that if you could throw in some storm troopers, a Jedi master or two, a strange relationship between father and son and daughter, a couple of droids, and a Sarlac, you could really dress up this old story. Throw in powerful music and some special effects and you just might engage masses of people to consider the story. Get a promotional department to hype it, the merchandising department to put the story on everything imaginable (and a couple of things beyond imagination) and you can engage the world.

The triumph of good over evil. The victory of life over death. The conquest of the darkness by the unconquerable light. That’s not Star Wars. That’s the story of Jesus Christ.

And it begins, in of all places, with two women – powerless, unregarded, dismissed by the world of their day. It begins with a young girl, perhaps barely a teenager and an older women, considered far past her child-bearing years. They meet to share the joy of their pregnancies and discover that there is more to their story then they even knew.
Through these two virtually invisible women, God is about to turn the world upside-down. Not two men, who would have taken credit for it all. Two women, who risked life and limb to be partners with God in a rebellion that would take down an empire and awaken a force for life in all its fullness and wonder.

That would make a great story – and an even greater movie. Oh, wait. It already has.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
the has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.