

“PONDERING CHRISTMAS”

Luke 2:1-20

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

She treasured these things. Mary—listening to the shepherds’ dramatic account of events in the fields. An angel of the Lord, an astonishing figure to behold, with an even more astonishing announcement, points them toward Bethlehem. I imagine the shepherds bursting into the lean-to behind the Inn, startling Mary and Joseph, out-of-breath and tripping over their words like kids do when they’re overcome with excitement. “And there was this angel...and she looked like she was on fire...and she said the Messiah...the Lord...*child*...wrapped...in a manger...and then there were more angels, and they were singing, and”—Gracious child, slow down, settle yourself, take a deep breath! But there’s Mary, grinning—this was more confirmation for her than news—and treasuring, Luke says. She “treasured all these words...”

Luke says the shepherds, upon arriving, saw the child lying in the manger. But I like to believe that during all their romper room storytelling Mary instinctively moved to the manger and lifted the child into her arms. I believe so because to treasure means to keep, to protect, to preserve and hold close. So, as the shepherds proceed with their story, she keeps not only their words, but the child himself, clutching him close to her chest, tightening his swaddle, dotting on the loose edges, kissing his forehead, feeling his warmth, putting her ear close to his breathing, to treasure the very warmth of God, the breath of God, the quick, pulsing heart of God, keeping him, protecting him, preserving him, treasuring...

What of the angel’s message do you most treasure? That this will be good news of great joy for all the people? Or that after all the centuries of waiting and hoping, *to you this day in King David’s own city*, a child is born who will save us—who will take our sins and bury them and forget them? Who will save not only us, but all of our fallen creation? Or that the unfolding pattern of words in the angel’s message equates the words “Savior,” “Messiah,” “Lord,” and “sign,” with...*child*. Or do you treasure that God will accomplish all of this by means of a newborn as vulnerable as the patch of soft flesh on top of his head?

What do we treasure about Christmases past? The ornament from years ago, made of popsicle sticks and Elmer’s glue, framing the Kindergarten class picture, swaddled in tissue paper more carefully than our most fragile decorations. The old video of the Christmas play, remember? When she was dressed up as the angel and knocked over one of the shepherds who just happened to be her brother? The memory of your surprise guests who just showed up one year, and—wasn’t that the best Christmas ever?

But as Mary keeps this newborn, draws him close to herself, nestles him in comfort, she not only treasures these things...she *ponders* these things in her heart. It is one thing to treasure. But it is quite another thing to ponder. To ponder is not merely to think about, or even to ruminate, but to encounter, to deliberate, to struggle within oneself. To ponder in this sense means the heart is stirring. Mary treasures these things, but she also tosses-and-turns over them. Can you see

Mary, holding her infant close, laughing and cooing one minute, and then the next, her eyes far away, brooding over the shepherds' herald, staring through everyone in the room?

Pondering is how we process many of the most wonderful moments in our lives. The acceptance letter—I got in, I got in! I'm going to college! But then it dawns on you, *Uh oh, I'm going to college*. The engagement ring—She said yes! She said yes! And then, *Whoa, she said yes*. How I remember sitting across the dinner table from Erin at home one lovely summer night. She slid a small, wrapped gift across the table. I unwrapped a little book. It was *Beatrix Potter*. I'm going to be a daddy, I'm going to be a daddy! And then, *Uh oh, I'm going to be a daddy*. Whoa! Now I'm going to lose control, and my heart will be taken from me, and placed in another, and wherever he goes my heart will go. This is going to change *everything*.

What, specifically, do you think Mary was pondering? What in her heart was stirring and tossing and turning? I believe it was when the shepherds told her the angel said, "Do not be afraid." Why would you tell someone not to be afraid unless there was some reason to fear? Now they strike her in a different way—the words "a Savior, who is the *Messiah*, the Lord." Then Mary begins to ponder what the prophets have foretold about the Messiah. Jacob telling Judah, "He washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes" (Gen. 49:11). Isaiah saying, "By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?" (53:8). Zechariah saying, "When they look on the one whom they've pierced, they shall mourn for him" (12:10). Just a little while more, and Simeon will tell Mary face to face, "A sword will pierce your own soul, too."

Years ago, I remember hearing about a missionary couple who ministered in Liberia. Years after their ministry, an American bishop, David Lawson, was traveling through the region with an assistant from the local diocese. They drove nearly 4 hours outside of the city, stopping at a hill where, at the top, lay a plot of ground squared off by evergreens. In the middle of the plot there was a small, concrete box with no inscriptions. As they stood there, the Liberian began to weep, while the American bishop stood somewhat confused. When the moment was right, he broke the silence. "What are we looking at?"

"You don't know the story?" the Liberian host asked. "This is a story of the Fadley's...he taught us to grow crops in this arid land, and she was a teacher who started many schools. The people loved them, and they loved the people.

But she eventually became ill with a mysterious disease. Instead of seeking more advanced medical attention in the U.S., they remained. There were crops to plant and schools to start and churches starting up. Then Mrs. Fadley became so ill she couldn't travel. At the end of her life, she made a request of her husband: "We've loved these people. What we've been doing is beautiful and important. Our hearts belong here. When I die you can ship my body home. My parents would want that. But first I want you to ask the surgeons to remove my heart. I want my heart here."

As the story goes, standing there in the moment, the bishop knew what this memorial held."¹

So, may we treasure and ponder this on our way to the manger...that Christmas names the day that God takes God's own heart made flesh, and places it in our midst. Even more, the Christ child who delights us is also the child who pierces us. Christmas breaks the skin, cuts to the

¹ Kevin R. Armstrong and L. Gregory Jones. *Resurrecting Excellence* (Eerdmans, 2006) 175-76.

heart, and opens us up to the perilous love of God. We know Christmas has truly come when we find our own hearts tossed, turned, pierced—laid open before a God who has laid his heart upon our own.

How will we know when Christmas has come? Not only when we say to ourselves, “It’s true, it’s really true!” But when we, having treasured the story of Christmas all these many years, now come to ponder it in our hearts, until we come around to say again, and anew, “Oh my...it’s *true*.”

