

Prayer: Consult not your fears, but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern not yourself with what you tried and failed in, but what it is still possible to do. Now is the time to put aside past and present setbacks and failures and look with confidence to the new day called tomorrow. Amen.

“ADVENT IN PLAIN SIGHT - HEARTS”

I remember as a little girl we would go to church about ten o'clock at night. People would pray, testify, sing, cry, shout, and dance. The preacher would preach. There would be lots of men, women, boys and girls. As midnight neared, some older member/elder would start praying. We would all get down on our knees, thanking God and asking for mercy. Slowly we would get off our knees as the new year began and sing, “Thank you, Lord, for letting me see another year”.

Our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke may be a familiar one this time of year.

This question has been on my mind. Why should we care?

Why should we care about the story of a tiny baby born in a stable? There's no practical reason why anyone would have noticed him, born to a lowly family, snuggled up amidst the straw.

Shepherds were among the lowliest of people. There was no bed for them either. They slept in the open, keeping an eye on the sheep. There was no practical reason anyone would pay attention to them.

Why should we care?

Teenage parents, traveling for the census, looking for hospitality and finding it in the place where the animals slept. There's no practical reason why history should remember them.

Why should we care?

The Gospel makes it clear. Because God cares. In this tiny, wriggly baby, God offered them a gift, a future, a hope in a time when hope was as endangered as the St. Francis Satyr butterfly. And so, the shepherds followed the direction the angels gave. They found the lowly babe with his lowly family. And they told his mother all that they had seen and heard.

Mary has been on quite the journey these 9 months. The Angel Gabriel told her she is going to have a child. She traveled miles to see her cousin Elizabeth to have her confirm the angel's prediction. Now, Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem for the census—for the purpose of taxes. How ordinary, how relatable. Were you to pass her on the street, would you even notice?

Why should you care?

This young woman, this teenage girl, has held a lot in these nine months. And now, strangers, shepherds from the field, arrive and tell her what they have seen and heard. It's so much to hold.

Luke tells us, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

For years, I've read this line and considered a young Mary passively gazing up toward heaven, sweetly considering all that's occurred and all she's been told. But the Greek word for ponder—is far from passive. It's more interesting than that. Ponder is a verb with a sense of the things being thrown together.

Mary ponders, she considers all the things that have been thrown together—thrown at her—these last days, these last months. She wonders what on earth could all this mean for her and her baby. How many things have been thrown at us, thrown together these last 12-24-36 months?

It's not all solved. And so, we ponder. We look and consider...Where is God showing up in our life? Church? Community? World? Can we pause—to see, to recognize the places where heaven and earth are touching? Can we remember that in the midst of our ordinariness, our brokenness, the Creator of the universe intrudes, and that intrusion is disruptive, but that disruption is Good News?

Sometimes, there's so much being thrown at us, it can feel overwhelming. We can wonder whether anyone cares, whether God cares. Sometimes, with the weight of things, we wonder what's the point? Why bother recycling or conserving if companies and people are dumping waste and blasting through resources without a care for the future? Why bother caring for our neighbor when our neighbor only seems to look out for themselves? Does it really matter how I live?

A poor, teenage mother's heart—a tiny, fragile Jesus—baby whose story we've gone to great lengths to protect—why should we care? Does this story serve any purpose any longer? The short answer to all these questions is, of course, “yes.” Yes, it matters—It matters because it matters to God. God cares for the lowly. Time and again, God uses the lowly, the ordinary—to reach out to the created in unfamiliar and unexpected ways.

Like Mary listening and pondering—we learn to pay attention to the ways God may speak, whether through angels or shepherds. We learn to treasure up those holy moments where God appears in the least likely of places. We learn from Mary to ponder in our hearts the mysteries of our circumstances and God's presence and God's call.

No road, no life is without twists and turns, detours, and dead ends. But when we remain open, we will be surprised at what we may find—hope, where we thought there was no hope, and life, where we couldn't imagine that life could thrive. Amen.

Madeline L'Engle writes of the surprising way God breaks in... please receive this reading of her poem, “First Coming.”

He did not wait til the world was ready,
til people and nations were all at peace.
He came when the heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime
turned water into wine.
He did not wait til hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the word made flesh
the maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait til the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief and to touch our pain
he came with love; rejoice! rejoice!