

# Enter into the Song

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2018  
Luke 2:1-20

Last Wednesday night at Confirmation, I sat with some of the sixth- and seventh-grade boys for dinner. In conversation I asked the guys whether they had seen “The Wizard of Oz” at the Paramount. The boy next to me said “Yes” kind of unenthusiastically.

“Did you like it?” I asked.

“Not really.”

I was stunned. “What didn’t you like about it?”

“It was kind of strange.”

“Oh, well, did you know the story ahead of time?”

“No.”

“Oh! Well, that explains it. If you knew the story, you may have enjoyed it more.”

I am not sure he was convinced. I loved the Paramount production; it was one of my all-time favorites. It was dazzling and delightful, true to the 1939 film with some jazzy additions, like the jitterbugs who were part of the original story.

Tonight, we gather to hear and sing about the old, old story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. The story is familiar to most of us. Many of us here have known of it our whole lives. So, late in December of 2018, we gather and wonder: Does the old story hold anything new? Is there meaning in the miracle of a Baby Boy Born in Bethlehem millennia ago? Or are we only here for old-time’s sake?

Martin Luther wrote that there are three miracles in Christmas: God became a human being, a Virgin conceived, and Mary believed. Luther said the greatest of these is that Mary believed! She was willing to trust in God’s Word and Promise. Mary was open to the Song. And she joined in.

Even though we are only in the second chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Mary has already been through a lot: the Annunciation from the angel Gabriel; celebration with her older cousin, Elizabeth; months of expectation and wondering, expanding and waiting; traveling to Bethlehem; getting sent to the stable for labor and delivery. I wonder: Was there a midwife? Or only mother animals looking on in maternal support? And, now,

shepherds come to see her newborn with news of their own. This story, now so familiar to us, was certainly strange to young Mary. What to make of it all?

*Shepherds and angels and choirs, Oh My!*

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

In the Greek the word *treasure* means to keep close, to keep safe and sound. The word *ponder* literally is “placing together for comparison.” Or judging the worth of.

What words do we keep close? What words and experiences do we reflect on and consider worth keeping?

Can you guess what the top all-time Christmas film is according to several polls, including Rotten Tomatoes and December 2018 *Reader’s Digest*? What do you think?

... “It’s Wonderful Life.” (And, in case you’re wondering, “A Charlie Brown’s Christmas” and “A Christmas Story” came in second and third.)

Do you remember the story of “It’s a Wonderful life” with James Stewart and Donna Reed? Some say it was Stewart’s greatest role. The film was based on a 1939 short story entitled “The Greatest Gift.” In the 1946 film, George Bailey faces financial ruin and arrest. He considers himself a complete failure and wants to end it all on Christmas Eve. The only words he is pondering are *blame* and *shame*. He holds close only scenes of failure and hopelessness. But Clarence Odbody, a guardian angel second-class, comes to help George see a different picture of his life, and to judge other words of value.

Clarence-the-angel shows George flashbacks of his past ... including years before when he saved his younger brother from drowning ... when he intervened with a grief-stricken druggist to save a life. Clarence reminded despondent George of Bailey Park, the housing development that George supported financially so that the low-income people could own their own home. George’s life had clearly made a difference! Clarence-the-angel invites George to *ponder* these scenes, to put them together and to weigh their value. In the end George awakens to the reality that, despite depressing circumstances, he truly has had a wonderful life.

We may not feel as low as George Bailey, but sometimes certain scenes of sadness, loss, or failure hold us captive.

There are times in our lives when we are like George Bailey, when we hold on to hurtful critiques and negative comments ... go over and over in our minds and souls experiences of failure, disappointment, and regret. Sometimes we are like the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion: We hold on to scenes and stories of when we didn’t know what to do, felt frozen in our feelings, rusted shut, or too afraid of the forest.

Sometimes harsh words of criticism and scenes of turmoil stick to us like Velcro® ... and with too much power. Like when a marriage struggles, a friendship changes, a work position is terminated, or we get cut from the team, a bad grade. We wonder: What does this mean? What does this say about me? What should I hold on to?

AND! Sometimes, some of us, in delusion and denial completely dismiss all critiques; we blame others for our hardships and hurts, difficulties and distress. We welcome only praise.

Either way, treasuring and pondering—taking time to *think over* and to *feel through* our experiences—is the hard and helpful work of *contemplation*.

In my imagination, when I ponder Mary's pondering, when I consider what words are going through her head and what feelings are filling her heart, I put together the words of the angels—both to Mary and to the shepherds. When we put these together, we can see that the songs were much the same.

Gabriel came to Mary and said, "Do not be afraid Mary for you have found favor with God." Nine months later, an angel (Gabriel ... or was it Clarence?) came to shepherds and said, "Do not be afraid! I am bringing you good news for all the people!" And at the very end of the song, a whole choir joined in praising God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

As I ponder these angelic messages and put them together, I hear,

*"Do not be afraid! You have found favor with God."*

Dear people! This is worth our pondering! Luke is telling us that the GOOD NEWS of God's favor, God's desire for wellbeing, is for ALL people. The love that will never let us go has come into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This favor, or grace, comes to everyone, not only the well-educated, successful people with fancy credentials, but to those who would barely dream they could be included.

So, tonight, what if our worship time is a break from everything else that we have been doing and have yet to do? What if—instead of wandering around shopping, or wondering what if we have forgotten something, or someone, or worrying that something will go wrong with our celebrations, or fearing that we won't have a Merry Christmas—what if we ponder this ...

Do not be afraid! You are favored. Like Mary and the shepherds, George Bailey and Dorothy, we can trust that we are part of God's Dream. We can hold on to the good news and share in it.

*Angels and shepherds and songs! Oh My!*

Have you read about the work of the elves in Santa Claus, Indiana? Yep! Not all the millions of letters sent to Santa every year make it to the North Pole. Some end up in Indiana from as far away as South America and China. Every year about 200 elves read about 20,000 letters and answer every one. Mrs. Koch is the chief elf and has been at it for 78 years!

The tradition began in 1914, but became really popular in 1930, when she said the letters started to come like snowflakes! Sometimes the elves write up to 2,000 letters a day.

Mrs. Koch said the letters make the elves laugh and cry. Some letters announce accomplishments, like, "I stopped sucking my thumb." Some children write very sad letters, like, "I'm living with my grandma and I want to be with my daddy." The elves also receive letters from older people who are lonely and want a letter from Santa. Some are from inmates who ask Santa to write a letter to their children.

Some requests are really hard. Children whose parents are deployed want their parent home for Christmas. The chief elf said, "We don't make promises about what Santa will bring. We see our job as keeping the DREAM ALIVE."

The Dream that the Good News of God's favor, Good Will, and peace is for all people.

No matter what.

If we are lost like Dorothy, lack confidence like the Scarecrow, if we are rusted shut like the tin man, or lack courage like the lion ... we can ponder.

If we are stuck to stories of failure or regret, sadness or sorrow ...

If we are worried about our lives or the world ...

If we wonder about light in the darkness ... we can ponder.

If we are older, we may wonder, "What difference *has* my life made?"

If we are younger, we may wonder, "What difference *will* my life make?"

And ... we can ponder.

Tonight, we can remember Mary. She has been through a lot and there is more to come. The future must feel uncertain.

Tonight, she is trying to make sense of it all. And to trust she is not alone. Mary holds on to the words of the Angel: "Do not be afraid! You are favored!" Words to her and to the shepherds visiting her newborn. She pauses and ponders.

Mary reminds us that the treasured truth is the WORD became flesh and dwelled among us.

Dear people, we are, all together, favored by God. With Mary, we can trust in these words and say, "Here I am!"

We can participate in the Divine Dream. We can enter into the Song ... so that all people everywhere can sing with joy, "*It is indeed a wonderful life!*"

Merry Christmas! And Amen!

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