

Wonder

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 24, 2017
Christmas Eve – Year B
Luke 2:1-20



Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Two words stand out this night, beckoning us all with an invitation. It is the invitation that lies behind all the celebrations of the season – the gifts we will exchange and awake to tomorrow echo the invitation; the gatherings of family and friends we have already experienced and that will continue in coming days are an expression of that invitation; the lights, the trees, the ornaments, the lighting of candles week after week, the singing of carols, all summon us to the work of Mary – to treasure and to ponder.

The words Mary treasures and ponders are the words the shepherds bring – that the infant she holds to her chest is the Savior, that the little eyes looking back up at her from the vulnerable manger bed are the eyes of the Messiah, that the cries she hears in the night mingled with the sounds of the animals all around are the cries of the Lord. Savior, Messiah, Lord – here, now, wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.

Mary treasured these words. Some translate this as Mary “remembering” these words. But I am grateful for the translation we heard tonight, which seems more faithful to the full meaning of the Greek word – she treasured. She does not merely remember the words, but she remembers them with a kind of wonder. She takes the words and places them in that space in her soul reserved for awe and praise, she treasures them like fine jewels.

For my 50th birthday last summer, one of the many surprise gifts I received was the gift of special words prepared by my daughter for the occasion. She spent time reflecting on our shared life together as a family and words of love and me. Someone videoed her remarks and shared it with me, and I’ve found myself from time to time going back to that video and hearing those words again. I don’t just *remember* the words; I *treasure* them. They continue to fill me with wonder; wonder at the power of love, wonder at the gift of family, wonder at the blessings that come from God in generous measure.

This is Mary's invitation to us – to treasure the words we hear *tonight*; to wonder at the gift of God; to join the angels in praise at the grace announced this night.

To join in Mary's work of wonder, though, we will need time and space, we will need to make room in our often tired and over-stressed hearts and minds for the voice of another to be heard. To treasure these words, we will need to live with them a while, to give them time to do their work in us and for us.

Several years ago, the *Washington Post* arranged to have violinist Joshua Bell stand in the busiest subway in Washington D.C. in the middle of rush hour and play six pieces from some of the world's greatest composers. Bell was in a hat and blue jeans, he placed his violin case in front of his feet and tossed in a couple of dollars to sweeten the pot. And so the stage was set: the world's greatest violinist, playing some of the world's most cherished classical music, on one of the oldest and finest violins in existence.

Cameras recorded everything. In the forty-five minutes Joshua Bell played, only seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run - - for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves 1,070 who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

To hear the angel chorus, to treasure what we hear, to recognize the beauty and power of this night is hard to do if we rush by the music, if we refuse to linger at the manger.

You see on the video a woman and her preschooler coming off the escalator. "The woman is walking briskly and so, therefore, the child. She's got his hand. Evan is three. You can see Evan clearly on the video. He's the cute kid in the parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door. He keeps trying to pull his mother's hand, craning his head back. Finally, his mother puts her body between her child and Joshua Bell, cutting off her son's line of sight. As they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look."

Children are our greatest teachers in wonder, as we will see in countless households tonight. I recently heard someone exclaim to parents of a preschool child, "Your child is the perfect age for Christmas. She is still able to feel the magic." This is a worrisome observation, as it assumes wonder and awe fade as we age. It need not be so. Mary extends her invitation to all of us, to, as the hymn proclaims, become, "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

Mary does not just treasure these words; she also ponders them. The Greek word literally means, she threw the words together, she turned them over in her mind. Yes, she treasures, but she also wonders, perhaps using the same words she used earlier in the story, and ones we heard proclaimed so well this morning, “How can this be?”

Mary, of all people, knows the conditions of this birth. Caesar had proclaimed that all the world should be registered. *All* the world. Not part of the world, not a good percentage of the world – *all* the world. It is preposterous on its face, the arrogance of such a pronouncement. As far as Caesar is concerned, having acquired from his citizens the title, “The August One (Augustus),” and with statues all over the empire calling him “Lord” and “Savior,” he should be able to get all the world to go to their hometowns and get counted for the tax. Such arrogance in leaders almost never succeeds, but it can get people caught up in its machinery, especially the poor, those on the fringes. And so, Joseph and Mary, engaged to be married, her very pregnant, have to go on the road, and do their duty for Caesar.

I have traveled before, in a car, with my wife, when she was very pregnant. Let me just say, I cannot believe that the trip for Joseph and Mary, on foot, was inspiring or clean or anything close to perfect. I suspect it was chaotic and messy.

And there are a lot of people on the move in the empire, a lot of people traveling all around the back roads of rural Galilee to fulfill their duty to Caesar. There’s no room in the inn, as you know, and so a messy story becomes really grimy. The barn in the back lot will have to suffice. Maybe Mary and Joseph are beginning to doze off, thinking on the whole, given the circumstances, this is not so bad, when the first labor pain hits Mary.

Luke is sparse with his language, and we’ve heard the story so many times we can gloss over and even glamorize the completely unglamorous fact that Mary had to go through her entire labor surrounded by the hot breath of animals, with as far as we can tell, no help from anyone except Joseph, in a *barn*. Again, I’ve witnessed the absolute miracle of birth, in a hospital, with trained professionals tending to my wife’s every need, and it was harrowing both times, and chaotic, and messy.

Christmas cards and nativity scenes may depict Mary with a soft light reflecting from her face, Joseph quietly in the background, the animals cute and cuddly standing or lying around, and little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes, but if we pause to consider the circumstances at all...it was a mess.

Mary doesn't just sit in wonder and awe, she also wonders just how it is that God *and* baby, God *and* shepherd-messengers, God *and* a manger, God *and* Mary, can possibly go together.

To ponder for Mary is to turn these things over and over in her head.

God and you, and me, and us. We do well to join Mary this night in pondering what it means that God chooses to come to us in this messy, imperfect way.

For many tonight, Christmas arrives in a hospital room, a homeless shelter, a refugee tent, a battlefield. Tonight, for many, Christmas arrives in the midst of grief and loss, broken relationships, uncertain futures. Christmas arrives tonight among divisions tearing at the fabric of our communities, our nation.

For all of us, Christmas arrives tonight in a world not yet as it is intended to be. That is why it arrives as it does, as God's gracious response to a world of conflict and confusion.

If Savior, Messiah, and Lord was born into the world in this way, right in the middle of the chaos and imperfection and mess, then God is most certainly born into our lives in precisely those moments when they seem most fragile, when we seem most alone, and God is close at hand when the world swirls in confusion around us.

Mary treasures these words, and ponders them in her heart. Let us come to the table of the Lord, where we are invited to treasure and ponder that this child will grow up, his body broken and his blood spilled as a reflection of the same love that gave him birth. And then, as we light candles together in the dark and sing, we are invited to remember (no to treasure) the truth that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

And then, holding this great treasure, pondering its mystery, let us bear our light into the world for all to see. That is Mary's invitation this night, what we have all been preparing for. It is the hope of the world. May it be so. Amen.