

December 24, 2020 Christmas Eve

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 2:1-20

"Pondering the Mystery"

Douglas T. King

This past Sunday in worship we had all of the glorious hustle and bustle of our Children's Christmas Pageant. We had angels, and shepherds who wrestled through rehearsal, wise women, even one with a beard, and exclamations galore! Bold pronouncements boomed out of tiny mouths. It was a glorious spectacle of energy and joy and unbridled youthful expectation.

As we gather remotely this evening the mood has shifted. There is undoubtedly joy on this holiest of nights. But there are other nuances of emotion present as well. We are nearing the end of a long day and a long year. Last minute presents have been wrapped, dinners have been served. Family members who are not gathered in our homes as usual are being missed. We long to gather in the communal candlelight of the sanctuary but we find ourselves lifting our single candles in the night. There is a little weariness in the midst of our sacred celebration and a few questions about what it all means.

Our journey from Sunday's pageant to this evening mimics the second half of this evening's text from Luke. After Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem and Mary gives birth we enter what I call the trumpet and timpani section of the text, classic pageant material. We get a brightly lit angel in the sky, divine announcements and a heavenly host of a choir that just

might rival ours, belting out in triple forte "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" The shepherds, in the middle of their normally quiet fields, are overwhelmed by this Broadway spectacle.

They dash off to find Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. They all scramble to share the story simultaneously, interrupting and speaking over each other, getting louder and louder. Fervently seeking to express the good news of which they have been told, and good news in all major chords and capital letters. The shepherds will soon hurry away to spread this good news throughout the countryside, taking all of their glorious hub-bub with them.

It would not take much to miss what happens next, to glide over the nineteenth verse of this text. With all of the high intensity, larger than life, enthusiasm, shouting and production going on, it would not take much at all. Let's hear the nineteenth verse one more time. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." It is a moment without bright lights, or loud words, or even any acknowledged movement. It is simply a weary mother of a newborn considering the implications of this new life in her arms. It is something that has gone on from time immemorial between mothers and their babies as the reality of the miracle of new life sinks in; a moment infused with more hopes and fears and expectations than mere words could ever convey.

But here there is even more going on, if that is even possible to say. For Mary has been told unbelievable things about this newborn. The angel Gabriel told her months ago of this child, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his

ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And once again an angel has brought news of who this newborn is, this time to shepherds, "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

We are told Mary "treasured these words" another translation says she "clung to these words." My favorite translation says she "preserved these words." It makes me think of preserves, colorful, ripe, fruit picked in the midst of the summer bounty, cooked down and canned in mason jars to be savored, to sustain us in the months to come.

And we are told she "pondered them in her heart." The word for ponder in the original Greek literally means to "throw together." (Johnson, p. 51) The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the root origins of our English word ponder are from Latin and French and include connotations of "balancing" and "ascertaining the weight of."

I cannot begin to imagine what it is to be a mother with a newborn, let alone Mary the mother of Jesus. But I can let my imagination run with all of these shades of meaning to Mary's pondering.

Pondering as throwing together. This is the classic challenge of our faith. Mary attempting to make sense of the fusion of a frail, vulnerable, finite human, born a baby, and the ruler of all existence, God, the one who is beyond all boundaries and all measure. For all of our efforts to explain this stark and stunning dichotomy, we just cannot fully grasp it. With what she and we are left is fundamental mystery.

Pondering as balancing. On the one hand Mary's life has been completely turned upside down, a baby is enough to do that. A baby that is the Son of God changes absolutely everything.

And on the other hand, life goes on. Like any parent since time began, Mary has a baby to love and nurture and raise, and all the daily stuff that entails. Everything has changed and yet everything remains the same. With what she and we are left is fundamental mystery.

Pondering as ascertaining the weight of. Mary must be wondering exactly what she is being handed. What is the scope of this gift she has received? God in her midst, literally enfleshed and in her lap. How can that be quantified or understood on any level? With what she and we are left is fundamental mystery.

Tomorrow some of us will do our share of high profile celebrating. In the morning our youngest ones will gift us with oohs and ahs and even screams of delight around the Christmas tree. We will sing carols, and exchange hearty Merry Christmases, even if some of them are over Facetime and the telephone. We will have our time beside the beaming heavenly host and the enthusiastic shepherds.

But let's also find some time to sit beside Mary; to preserve these words we are hearing; to distill them and save them for the days to come and to ponder them in our hearts. For whatever we understand about the arrival of this Savior, this Messiah, Jesus Christ into our midst, there is so much more we do not understand.

There is so much fundamental mystery still at play. And that is not a bad thing. In fact it is quite a good thing.

This fundamental mystery allows for the gift of pondering; of bringing together our notions about God and humanity and the myriad of ways we are connected and divided and one; of balancing how to live when we are told everything has changed

this night and yet our lives go on, and can appear on the surface as if nothing has changed; of weighing the depth of the gift of a God who loves us so much that they will cross the span between heaven and earth to heal all that ails us.

In this year when we have struggled to understand so many bad things. I invite you to engage in an entirely different quest for comprehension. When the topic is God's love for us in Jesus Christ born in our midst, pondering is a good thing. Fundamental mystery is a good thing. Christmas is a very good thing.

Merry Christmas.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991.