

Treasuring and pondering

Christmas Eve 2018

Church of the Ascension

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond, Rector

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glory-fying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. - Luke 2:1-20

Whenever we hear this Nativity gospel in the dark of night on Christmas Eve, my attention tends to gravitate to the shepherds, 'keeping watch over their flock by night.' Out of the darkness, 'an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord that shone around them.'

But some of that shine now feels diminished by the light of day. More often when I hear this gospel on Christmas morning, I'm drawn to a verse at the end of the story: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." In addition to the matter of daylight, I've always found it easier to *treasure* and *ponder* on Christmas morning. Even here at Ascension, with organist and choir, there are fewer if any religious tourists. The liturgy is simpler, a better environment for contemplation.

So take a moment with me to review how much ground is covered in this story before we arrive at the apparent destination of Mary's heart. The path begins in the first verse, where reference is made to 'all the world.' The narrative then moves to entire governmental and cultural regions, Galilee and Judea. Then the story



narrows down to one town, Bethlehem. Then one street. One property. A coach house, open to the weather, where the child is born.

The perspective expands again to the *region* when the shepherds are introduced and then the whole cosmos is implied and opened up by the *heavenly host*. And after all of that, the story draws to a close by taking us into the heart of Mary. "*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*"

The language of treasuring particularly captures my attention. For the first time ever, this morning I wondered if the gospel writer uses this word with particular reference to, and by way of contrast with, Caesar Augustus, mentioned in the first verse. The emperor would have represented all the opulent *treasure* and privilege and power to which the world always aspires. And yet no amount of that earthly treasure could buy what Mary is inwardly treasuring.

The notion that Luke may have intended this contrast here is strengthened when we consider how this same contrast permeates his entire gospel. It's the contrast between the treasure and power to which the world continues to aspire and the treasures of forgiveness, healing, spiritual wholeness and eternal consciousness with God that Christ now comes and offers to all.

As far as Mary's *pondering* goes, it's a timely example for us now, in the midst of a season overloaded for so many of us with commitments and stimulation and so many competing notions of what we mean by holidays. But isn't it true that contemplation is always countercultural? Who has time for it? Or if we do, our friends look at us strangely, or they wonder how our spiritual technique can be monetized.

Contemplation can even be countercultural within the church. It's not a practice that necessarily resolves anything or prepares us to form a creed or win an argument. It is about finding and ordering and tending the place in the heart where the holy One dwells and where Christ may continually be born again in us.

Our take home assignment on this Christmas morning may involve an inventory of what we treasure. Or we might wonder what it would be like to actually locate the place in our hearts where we *treasure these words* that we have come together to hear. We might locate some false treasure in our heart that it's time to clear out to make room for truer currency. Or we could take some time to identify those people whom we treasure because by their example we came to faith. And we might intentionally let them know how much we treasure them.

Or we might simply take the practical step of identifying the time and place, today or in the coming days of Christmas, when we might devote ourselves to pondering. Perhaps in doing so we will catch at least a glimpse of where and when and how the Messiah is now being born in us. *Amen.*