



PONDERING THE MYSTERY

December 24, 2017, Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

We started the day in this room this morning with all of the glorious hustle and bustle of our Children's Christmas Pageant. We had angels and shepherds and clanging bells and exclamations galore! Bold pronouncements boomed out of tiny mouths. It was a glorious spectacle of energy and joy and unbridled youthful expectation.

We have re-gathered this evening and the mood has shifted as we sit together in the muted light of our sanctuary in the night. There is undoubtedly joy on this holiest of nights. But there are other shadings of emotion present as well. We are nearing the end of a long day. Last-minute presents have been wrapped; large dinners have been served. Far-flung family members have been welcomed into our homes. There is a little weariness in the midst of our sacred celebration and a few questions about what it all means.

Our day parallels 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 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 might just 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, overwhelmed by this Broadway spectacle, in the middle of their normally quiet fields, 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 capital letters. The shepherds soon dash away to spread this good news throughout the countryside, taking their glorious hubbub 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. But 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 can 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 now the shepherds have once again brought news from an angel of who this newborn is "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 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. Attempting to make sense of the fusion of a frail, vulnerable, finite human, born a baby, and the King of Kings, 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. What she and we are left with is a 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 she 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. What she and we are left with 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? What she and we are left with is fundamental mystery.

Tonight and tomorrow we will do our share of high-profile celebrating. In a few minutes we will belt out "Joy to the World." In the morning there will be screams of delight around the Christmas tree, and Christmas Carols, and hearty Merry Christmases. 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 a very good thing. This fundamental mystery allows for the gift of pondering; of bringing together our ideas 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 that loves us so much that there is no boundary that will not be crossed for us. Pondering is a good thing. Fundamental mystery is a good thing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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