

# “Mary, Did You Know?”

4 December 2005 (Advent 2)

Bible passage: **Luke 2:15-19** (*The Message*)

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over,” Let’s go over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.” They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself.

**Sermon in a nutshell:** There are some things about the Christmas season that deserve our “holding them deep,” or pondering them. What are they and how do we do that?

Do you ever find yourself wondering why things are as they are? For instance, if a #2 pencil is the most popular, why is it still #2? Or, how it’s possible to have a “civil” war? Or why in the world do they put an expiration date on sour cream? Isn’t it already sour? What more could happen to it?

I suppose those are the more mundane things that we sometimes think about, but we may at times wonder about the bigger stuff—like what it would be like if...? What would it be like to win the lottery? Or, what would it be like to be in his or her skin? Or what would it be like to go there, or experience this or that? Sometimes the “really big stuff” has to do with, as our family often said, “God and the meaning of life.”

In a sense, I think that’s what’s going on in our Bible passage for today. This particular version of the Christmas story is only found in the Gospel of Luke—one of the four books of the Bible that tell about the life of Jesus, and its historical accuracy cannot be verified. However, the story is beautifully told, and the truth that permeates the story is that something powerful, something of God, happened. The passage that we have occurs after Jesus has been born, when some strange visitors begin to show up sharing some rather bizarre stories. According to the story line, these shepherders have had some sort of a vision that led them to this place, that caused them to seek out this child whom they believe to be special, in one way or another.

The version of the story as we have it reads like this: **As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over,” Let’s go over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.” They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.**

**Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself.**

Now just think about the situation the story tells us about. We have two pretty young folks—teenagers, in all probability. They’re miles away from their hometown; the young girl is pregnant, and after a rigorous trip on a donkey, she goes into labor. There’s no place to stay in the entire town, and finally, some compassionate soul takes pity on them and offers the cave-like barn

where his animals were kept. It's there, in a smelly, damp, unpleasant setting, surrounded by cows and sheep and who knows what else, that the baby is born.

Now that has to be traumatic enough, but then these strangers come to visit and have some unusual tales to tell the new parents.

Giving birth to the baby, notwithstanding anything else, would certainly give a young man and a young woman pause to think, and I suspect that's something that any of us who have ever held a new baby in our arms can identify with. Who can look at a newborn without being absolutely overwhelmed with a sense of the miracle of it all? Who can look at those tiny eyelashes and fingernails, and those minuscule fingers and toes without wondering? Who can look at a baby without pondering just what that baby will look like as he or she grows, or the kind of personality that will develop, or the things they'll be interested in and love, what kind of person they will become?

I really suspect that's some of what Mary was thinking about. Our passage says that she kept all these things to herself, deep within. More traditional versions of this line say that Mary "pondered" these things in her heart. I like that word—"ponder." It's a good word, and I think it more adequately reflects what Mary was going through. To ponder has to do with weighing in the mind or reflecting or considering with thoroughness and care. It is about wondering at a deeper level. It is all about reflecting deeply on a topic or subject.

That's what Mary was doing. With that little baby in her arms, she probably began to wonder what it would be like, being a parent, facing the future. My guess is that she was filled with excitement and anticipation of what lay ahead, but at the same time, there was apprehension and fear. She had to wonder how God was acting in her life at that moment. What did it all mean?

I suspect that what the theologian Soren Kierkegaard once said rang very true for Mary and Joseph. He once wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Mary was trying to piece together all that had come before, and contemplate all that lay ahead; she wanted to understand all that wasn't yet able to be known or understood.

Being a first-time parent wasn't easy in those days, and it's not easy today. We all wish we knew a lot more than we do, and parenting just doesn't come naturally. If nothing else happened the night Mary gave birth, having a new baby in her arms had to cause her to think more seriously about life and responsibility and the future. Having another life to care for can be a sobering experience, and it can thrust us into deep thought. It can cause us to ponder all that has happened.

So can other things, of course. Being told we don't have long to live can certainly cause us to reflect deeply on what our life has been like, what we want to change, and how we'd like it to conclude. Just think about the popular Tim McGraw song "Live Like You Were Dying." It talks about someone whose life came to an abrupt halt with a medical diagnosis.

McGraw sings, "I asked him when it sank in, that this might really be the real end? How's it hit you when you get that kind of news?" He's acknowledging that anything that alters the status quo has a way of shaking us up, and causes us to look at life far differently from before. It causes us to ponder.

Maybe the holiday season this year could and should be a reason for us to ponder. This is one of the special holy times of the year, and yet many of us move at such a pace that we can't even catch our breath, let alone ponder the real meaning and impact of the season. We're under a lot of pressure to buy, buy, buy, and retailers have been trying to lure us into doing that since before Halloween—just to get to us before we see our winter heating bills.

There's so much emphasis on the modern commercial aspects and the usual traditions of Christmas that I fear that many of us will fail to ponder what it's really all about. We can't think about the more profound aspects of the season, because we think that there isn't time. After all, we have cookies to bake, the house to decorate, parties to host, gifts to buy, and the list goes on and on.

It seems to me that, of all the times and seasons of the year, this is the one when we need most to ponder the bigger issues in much the same way Mary did. She was trying to figure out just where God was in all that was going on, and maybe we should spend some time pondering the same thing. Where is God this holiday season? How do we know that which is of God? What is God doing in our lives this Christmas?

In order for that to happen, one of the things we need to do, in my opinion, is to find time to be still and look and listen, and think deeply and reflect. If we want to experience the true depth of what Christmas is all about, we need to make room for that spirit in our hearts and minds. We will need to pause and give ourselves time to reflect, and for that to occur, we have to be willing to set aside the non-essentials and make room for the essentials—like where we might see God's love in evidence.

You might be asking yourselves "How do we do that?" I doubt that these ponderings will happen to us in our rush to get to dinner or a movie, although I certainly won't preclude that possibility, but it may take some effort and attention on our part. It may take sitting in a car a few minutes before going into the house or into work, to just get ourselves centered.

Maybe it means we'll need to walk outside on a clear crisp night and gaze upward at the heavens, and reflect on the wonder of God at work in our firmament. Maybe it has to do with sitting still long enough to see glimpses of generosity and selfless giving, to hear tidbits of joy-filled greetings, to let a sense of peace invade our being, to sense the possibilities that are just beyond this moment.

It starts with making a commitment to have some quiet time each day—even if it's just a few minutes—when we ask, "Where have we seen God at work today?" "Where has God's loving activity been evident?" "What is one way I can be more loving? How can I be God's love in this world?"

If we make ourselves pause long enough to look for God this season, we just might see in a new way—even in the little things like the sparkle in a child's eyes, like a listening ear to someone who's hurting, like a hug that says someone understands. We might see God in a shared tear or in a deep, joy-filled laugh. When we take the time to look, I'm convinced we'll see God all around us.

I'd like to propose that you and I make a deal—that every day between now and Christmas, we agree to pause long enough to ponder, and see what happens. I'm convinced that when we

pause, when we sit still long enough to ponder these things in our hearts, God will reveal them to us, and we will experience, maybe for the first time, the real wonder of Christmas.

Are you with me?

### **Closing:**

When we take time to ponder all these things, I believe that we will experience what the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel once called “radical amazement.” By that he meant that we would know moments of transformed perception and understanding in which the earth is filled with the glory of God.” I pray it be so.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.