

## **“BUT MARY PONDERED”**

A Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

Text: Luke 20:1-20

Mary was different.

When the shepherds found the “baby lying in a manger,” they freely shared what had been told them about this child: that he was born to be Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

But not Mary. Mary treasured what they told her, and she pondered it in her heart.

The people who heard what the shepherds said were amazed. In the gospel of Luke, people are often “amazed” at the powerful deeds of Jesus. Even more often, though, they are “amazed” at things people say. And everybody who heard that the baby was to be the Messiah and Lord “was amazed.”

But not Mary.

Luke tells us her reaction was different from everyone else’s. Everyone was amazed, but “But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

“Treasured” means she held these words close. “Pondered” means she tossed the words around, wondering what they really meant. How should she understand what had just happened? What were the implications? How would this work? . . . How do you raise a Messiah?

So. Shepherds were alarmed. We know Joseph was anxious. The people of Bethlehem were amazed. But Mary was different. She heard their testimony and took it under advisement. Because Mary was a thinker. Mary was a nerd.

I know, because I remember what took place a chapter before. Nine months before.

Remember when the angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce what would happen? The angel started out “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Luke says she “was perplexed” and “pondered” what sort of greeting this might be. (I told you, Mary was a thinker.

The word “pondered” used in Luke 1 means to dialogue. Mary had an internal dialogue! She considered alternatives.

Let me tell you how the dialogue might have gone.

Gabriel had said “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Mary thought of scriptures she knew. She may have come up with three scriptures in which an angel said “The Lord is with you.”

Uh, oh.

First was Gideon in Judges 6:12—the angel said “the Lord is with you; go put an army together; we have a country to save.” Then there was David in 2 Samuel 7:3. “The Lord is with you; get busy and build a temple.” Thirdly, King Asa: “The Lord is with you; it’s time for you to reform Israel.”

“The Lord be with you” could be prologue to an immense, special task! Mary’s hardest job until then had been carrying jugs of water from the well on her head. The thought of filling a hero’s shoes might have inspired momentary dread. She had always thought of herself as a “lowly one.”

On the other hand (so the dialogue went) the first part of the greeting seemed to imply blessing: “Greetings, favored one!” Anybody, any day, should be happy to hear that God’s favor was upon them, and that would have been happy news.

So she considered. Had God come to ask her to do more than she could do? Or to bestow blessing?

Then the angel explained, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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.”

Mary asked for one additional clarification, since she was not even married yet; the angel explained, and said “Nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Nine months later, when the shepherds confirmed what Gabriel had told her, Mary could not be amazed. She listened to what they said, noticed the consternation this caused them and everyone else, and kept thinking. She weighed the new evidence, and continued to give herself to her baby, to her God . . . and to us.

If we are smart like Mary, we will realize there are two possibilities when we hear a voice say “The Lord is with you.” It may be bad news or good news.

If we hear God’s call and compare it to ourselves, what we are capable of, where we stand on the spectrum of greatness, it is bad news. We would have to decline.

But if we consider the truth about what we know about God from looking at Jesus Christ; if we recognize that Jesus came not with a list of demands but with blessing in his hand, it is good news—and we would be foolish to refuse.

God’s presence in our lives is not good news if we operate with a simplistic notion of God’s justice. If we think God’s justice means he will take away from us what we don’t really deserve, and give us what we truly deserve—and the same to everyone else,

then we don’t want God that close. Then the appropriate response for us is not that of Mary, but that of Isaiah. He had a vision of God-getting-close-to-us while ministering in the temple.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

I suspect “Woe is me” was Mary’s first thought, when Gabriel spoke to her. It should be our thought as well, because of how holy God is and how unholy we are. “Who can stand” in God’s presence, where all truth comes out? “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.” That is not us, and not Mary either, if we only measure ourselves. People like us only want God close enough to be handy in a pinch. We desire God’s blessing without his truth.

But God-becoming-close-to-us in the baby Jesus is good news if God is coming with mercy in his hand. And that is what the angel said. “Do not be afraid; God is not coming with new demands. Rather, God has good news of great joy for all the people.” “Good news . . . great joy . . . all the people.”

Now it is our turn to ponder. Our turn to wonder how this can be. We can toss this around for a bit, try on various possibilities. Might this baby be our baby, too? Could the peace he came to bring pertain to us well? How could it be a holy God’s will to treat us like his own people? Is Jesus going to reign

forever? Shall we receive Jesus, even today [even tonight], even at this communion, as though this is all true?

Think it over if you want to. I recommend we go with Mary's answer. Not looking at ourselves and our capabilities, but looking at God and his mercy, let us say "Here we are, servants of the Lord; let it be to us according to your good news."

Amen.

