

Christmas Eve A (12/24/2019)

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

God's claim on our lives certainly gives us reason to "ponder," even struggle, with what that claim will mean. Mary's challenge – to bear God to the world – is also a challenge to bear with God, to endure all the stress and uncertainty and, ultimately, grief of motherhood, all for the sake of delivering the Deliverer.

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Last week, our one-and-a-half-year-old came down with a fever that lasted several days. And, if he suffered, it meant that our whole household suffered. Want to really test your patience and capacity for love? Share a space with a toddler who won't sleep longer than thirty minutes at a time, who refuses to eat and instead throws food in your face, and who melts into a puddle on the floor, wailing, at the slightest affront to his sensibilities. After a few days, we were all at the end of our rope.

Have kids, they said. It'll be fun, they said.

I can't hear the Christmas story this year without thinking of last week in our house. In fact, for five years now, I haven't been able to hear the Christmas story without thinking of all the joys and burdens of parenthood in general. **The "hopes and fears of all the years" are indeed met in Bethlehem that first Christmas night,¹ at least the hopes and fears of the new baby's wide-eyed parents.**

Joseph was a faithful participant, of course, but Mary has sparked the church's imagination to a much greater extent over the ages. Rich Marian narratives have developed in various traditions around the world, and Mary remains an object of admiration, even devotion, for multitudes of Christians. **Who was this courageous**

¹ Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

teenager from a backwater town in a marginal corner of the Roman Empire?

What was it about Mary that moved God to name her the mother of Christ? And, how does she continue to exemplify the life of faith?

The scarcity of detail in Luke's account of the actual birth has raised a number of interesting questions. Was the "manger" a feed trough or an animal stall? Was the "inn" a separate lodging, or an already-occupied guest room in the home of a local resident? Also on the subject of construction, was the "stable" (which Luke never mentions) a cave, a stand-alone barn, or an animal dwelling attached to the home? If the birth in fact occurred in a private home, who might have been present with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? And of course, were there farm animals (also not mentioned in the story)?

But far more important than these, in my opinion, is the question: **Did Mary know what she was getting into?** One good answer is no, no more than any first-time parent can possibly know what parenthood will entail. Still, Mary displays an unusual wisdom, an aptitude for faithful speculation that she demonstrates, for instance, upon receiving the news of Jesus' conception nine months earlier: "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant," she proclaims, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...."² **Mary grasps the sweeping implications of the advent of the Son of God, both for conventional kings and for the poor who suffer under their rule. She is a prophet, a truth-teller consistent with Israel's long tradition.**

This portrait doesn't necessarily resonate with classic depictions of Mary as the passive vessel of precious cargo, the quiet and subservient woman of faith. **Mary is receptive to the call of God, but she's also bold, willing to step into her role**

² Luke 1:48, 52.

wholeheartedly: “Let it be with me according to your word,” she tells the angel, the messenger of God.³

This doesn’t mean, however, that Mary is naïve. In response to the angels’ proclamation to the shepherds, according to Luke, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” If she’s mild and serene, this moment may seem like nothing more than an afterthought, the innocent meditation of a dutiful servant. But a closer look at the original language reveals her more complicated response. The Greek word for “pondered” is *symbollo*, which carries multiple meanings throughout Luke’s story. *Symbollo* can mean “ponder” or “consider,” but it can also mean “debate,” “cross-examine,” even “wage war.”⁴ So, Mary’s pondering is more conflicted than we might have thought; it’s an internal struggle: *Mary treasured all these words and wrestled with them in her heart.*

Now that sounds like the emotional state of a new parent! What will it mean, after all, to raise the Son of God? The circumstances surrounding the birth are trying enough. What about his infancy and childhood? How will his parents keep him safe and help him thrive? How will they handle it when the toddler Jesus gets sick and melts into a puddle on the ground, crying inconsolably for a week straight? How will they teach him the faith in order to prepare him for his Messianic ministry? And in the end, how will Mary possibly cope with the worst-case scenario, to witness her child’s persecution and painful death firsthand?

The story of Christmas is a call story. God chooses Mary to play a singular role in the story of salvation. And, there is no plan B; Mary has to be all in. Her

³ Luke 1:38.

⁴ Acts 17:18; Luke 11:53; Luke 14:31.

challenge – to literally bear God to the world – is also a challenge to bear with God, to endure all the stress and uncertainty and, ultimately, grief of motherhood, all for the sake of delivering the Deliverer. The good news is that God deems her worthy: “You have found favor with God,” the angel assures her.⁵ *It won’t be easy, but you’ve got this.*

The lingering question is: What does any of this have to do with you? In spite of its familiarity, the story of Christmas may seem too fantastic, too far removed to make any real difference. But, **if Christmas bears witness to a God in the flesh, a God who shows up in the actual circumstances of our lives, then it’s a call story for you, too.**

To quote a friend and colleague:

If you’ve been, as I have often been, wondering what good it is to have Christmas every single year when it doesn’t seem like anything is changing for the better, think on this:

Perhaps it is you... you’re the one pregnant with new possibilities, by God, and we’re all waiting for you.⁶

God’s claim on our lives certainly gives us reason to “ponder,” to struggle, with what that claim will mean. God knows it won’t be easy; the life of faith means bearing with God, enduring all the stress and uncertainty and grief of what it means to be human. The good news at Christmas is that God has come to bear with us in the flesh – to share our hopes and our fears – that we might share in the abundant life God intends for us and for the whole world.

The words of the angels ring true: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.” You have found favor with God, friends. Treasure it, wrestle with it, and let it be with you according to God’s purpose.

⁵ Luke 1:30.

⁶ Tim Brown, Facebook, 12/2/2019.