

December 24 and 25, Nativity (Luke 2:8-20)

## **Mary gives us permission to pause and ponder what we hear.**

December 5, 2018

The glory of the Lord full-on. Angels appearing out of nowhere, singing and promising peace. Shepherds, at first trembling in their sandals, now glorifying and praising. And one quiet young woman, who has journeyed a long way and just given birth in a stable, “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

Presumably, she is tired—giving birth to a baby, even a messiah, takes energy. How exhausted was she after Gabriel’s Annunciation, the celebration with Elizabeth, nine months of pregnancy, travel to Bethlehem, and getting punted to a stable to give birth? And now a bunch of ragged shepherds barge in on her and her newborn in the middle of the night.

She offers in the midst of all this chaotic excitement a beautiful gesture of repose: she remembers, and she thinks. The image here is powerful because readers know that she does have a long way to go in her understanding. Mary already knows much, but she does not know everything. It will get worse when she and Joseph present Jesus in the temple and she hears that a sword will pierce her own soul. We know the painful devastation that lies ahead, but here in this moment, surrounded by donkeys and shepherds, she is still treasuring and pondering, trying to make sense of it all. Perhaps she gives us permission to pause and treasure each word, every detail of the birth of the Christ child.

Not all children are cherished by their mothers, and not all words are to be treasured. I remember one teenager who came to our church (let’s call him Jimmy). Jimmy had significant emotional and developmental difficulties, making it hard for him to interact socially. But he was kindhearted and wanted more than anything else to belong. He no longer lived at home; his father was not around, and with his mother’s permission a neighbor had taken him in. When someone at the church smiled warmly and said how glad we were that he was with us and that he was

helping out with some of the younger kids, he smiled broadly and replied, “I wish my mom had been here to hear that.”

Those words broke my heart. I’ve not treasured them, but I honor them by remembering them, and I continue to ponder what he said. Jimmy desperately wanted his mother to know that he was, in fact, a young man capable of contributing to a community, someone worthy of being praised. Clearly, he valued her opinion, longed for her approval. But he also knew that she would be surprised to hear people say such appreciative words about him. What kinds of things had his mother said to him over the years? What had he internalized from the time he was little? His impression of her impression of him was so utterly negative. Why couldn’t his mother see his many good qualities?

It’s not surprising that Jimmy lacked the capacity to sort through his mother’s words and determine for himself his sense of identity and value. Few of us can compete with what a parent tells us over and over again from the time we are little. From the time we are young, we internalize what others think of us.

Someone’s harsh words stick with us with disproportionate power, particularly after a breakup or a divorce: someone who loved me, someone who got to know me, ultimately concluded that I am not worth living with. We remember the nasty criticism and assume that the other person must be correct, forgetting all the other appreciative words that friends and family have spoken. Or, if we receive too much boundless praise, we come to think that we can do no wrong. There may or may not be any truth whatsoever in what other people say about us. But we take their words as gospel.

Learning how to filter what others say—to accept accurate criticism or recognize baseless flattery—requires hard work and the capacity for honest self-reflection. We need the patient strength to sort through our feelings and bring sober judgment to assess what’s accurate and what’s not.

This is why I love the image of Mary pausing to treasure and ponder in her heart the powerful words she hears. She is modeling a discipline for Christians, reminding us of the contemplative, thoughtful dimension of Christian faith. Mary is exhausted, but she exhibits an exquisite unity of thought and feeling when she pauses and ponders what she hears in her heart.

She also reminds us that, whatever anyone else says about us, the treasured fact that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us is something we need to meditate on throughout our lives. Jesus, after all, knows us better than anyone else, better than those who praise or disapprove unreasonably, and he comes to us both as decisive judge and self-sacrificing redeemer. That's something to ponder and treasure.