

My text this evening may startle you a bit – especially given the fact that it comes from a faith culture somewhat different from our Anglican/Episcopal tradition. But as I have read and reread the Christmas story over the past week, I find myself considering a text familiar to Roman Catholics, if not as much so to us:

***“Hail, Mary, full of grace. Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.”***

Protestant Christians – including Anglicans – have been reluctant to focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus. And, in a sense, this is as it should be. For the center of the entire Nativity story is Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, the object of God’s planning and humanity’s longing. Nevertheless, I find myself considering the fact that the center of the Nativity story is being held in loving, motherly arms this night. There is something about Mary calling for our attention.

For centuries Christians from many lands, cultures, and races have come together to listen to Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth. It is told simply enough to be understood, but there is enough color and characterization that it can envelop the listener. Visual artists have painted pictures, and musicians have set the text to music so that hearing the words can evoke sights and sounds. We see Mary in our mind’s eye and perhaps hear her lullaby.

And theologians have interpreted Luke’s text so that there is common agreement that this is far more than an ancient Semitic birth story. This is a chapter in salvation history. Jesus’ birth is at the heart of God’s plan to redeem the world. This creative, redemptive, faith-nurturing God chose to surprise earth’s citizens by entering it in human form.

Bethlehem, angels, shepherds, the manger and animals, the right time, and finally baby Jesus’ birth is a chapter of that great book we could well title ***“How God Chose to Save the World.”*** And Mary is present in this chapter.

Mary is certainly a significant *participant* in the story, but *God* is the central actor. God *initiates* – and we humans *respond*. Mary is one of us. But if any one of us has ever asked the question, “What do we do now that we know that God is indeed redeeming the world?” her example is worthy of our attention. God is acting, and Mary is teaching us how to respond.

How *do* we respond? What *shall* we do? Mary points the way: *Mary pondered*. “She treasured all these words and *pondered* them in her heart” (*Luke 2:19*). The shepherds lingered near this newly made family and told them about seeing angels and hearing music and knowing God had directed them to this out-of-the-way place.

Mary kept quiet and *pondered* what they had said. Earlier, after an angel visited her with the announcement that the child she was bearing was destined to be the savior of the world, Mary also *pondered*. Later she would sing about this event to her relative Elizabeth. But twice, in the presence of angelic visitations and messages, she quietly considered the content of the words she heard, thought about them deeply, and allowed those words to do their necessary work in her heart. Mary was a good ponder-er.

Perhaps there are other descriptive words about Mary’s response to God’s work. Might we call her thoughtful? Reflective? Is she the embodiment of a contemplative soul? Or would her detractors call her a daydreamer, a time waster?

There are so many strident, angry religious voices in today’s world. God is named and proclaimed by religious leaders with thinly pursed lips, eyes filled with fire and fear, a voice that is both loud and angry, jaws clenched with rage, and fists pounding on a table. Do you find that credible? I have to tell you – I don’t.

Our world is in need of *thoughtful* Christians, those who would *ponder* the scriptures and the events of today’s world in light of the redemptive, grace-filled revelation of Jesus. Our world is in need of those actively seeking ways to fulfill the Gospel mandate with the same spirit Mary fulfilled it: her first response was not to go off half-cocked and shoot off her mouth and rage and foam and spread fear. Her first and best response was a contemplative one. She *pondered* what God was doing in her heart, and I imagine her immersing herself in worship and prayer.

Our world is in need of those who can speak with reasoned, credible voices in a civil manner. Are there any out there willing to tone down the rhetoric, to seek understanding instead of vindication, to maintain and build trusting relationships rather than to dismiss them?

***“Hail, Mary, full of grace. Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.”***

Mary is our mentor when it comes to pondering mystery. The pondering heart acknowledges a shortage of understanding but can wait and is willing to live with

mystery, to be silent in the face of that which cannot be explained, to refrain from quick pronouncements concerning the good and gracious will of God.

Many sense their faith being renewed at this time of the year. The light in the darkness, the holy family in humble surroundings, the unexpected experience of another's generosity can cause us to be open to God's grace and mercy in new ways.

If that's happening to you this Christmas, this moment, let your time of renewal take you deeper into the study of the Bible, into the practice of prayer, into acts of mercy and kindness and generosity. Let your heart be softened, your spirit kindled, your soul gently formed in the likeness of Christ. Let your mind be fruitful soil for the hard work of *pondering*, becoming thoughtful, being contemplative.

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That miraculous night centuries past saw heaven and earth meet in a small Jewish town in the Roman Empire. A visiting angel spoke to shepherds, and a chorus of angels sang a divine anthem, and a common birth was announced as holy. The Messiah had come to earth in the form of a baby, and this sign from God entered human existence through the likes of regular folks – Mary and Joseph. The story is so wonderful.

As we go our way tonight, remember how the mother of this Christmas child responded. Mary treasured the words from God and *pondered* them in her heart. Will the hearing of this story and the contemplative response of Mary invite your *pondering*? Blessed Christmas! Amen.