

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Each year, we hear the same story. But, this year, verse 19 grabbed my attention. That is, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” When I hear this phrase, it’s usually with an image like the one we see on the screen. Where Mary seems so peaceful with her hands folded, and Jesus looks oh, so clean...just after birth. To me, this doesn’t seem like a scene directly after a teenager gave birth to a bastard child in an animal shed. Just saying.

And, that’s the thing about this verse. If we go back to the original Greek, the word translated here as “pondered” is from the root *συμβάλλω* (*sumballō*). And, *συμβάλλω* (*sumballō*) does mean ponder, but it has a little more force to it. It’s pondering as in throwing things together, to encounter, or to strike together. So, basically, Mary sat there trying to figure out what happened! She’s throwing around in her head (1) the visit from the angel that told her she was pregnant, (2) the fact that the Joseph stayed with her even though he wasn’t the baby daddy, (3) the long 80+ mile journey she just took on a donkey while very pregnant, (4) the urgency to find a place to give birth, and (5) then, shepherds visiting her birthing room probably while she could have been bleeding with some after-birth pains and her first born son has some bloody hay stuck to his head.

I mean, I would be tossing around all of that in my head too! But let's not forget she migrated to Joseph's land which was unfamiliar to her. Then, she gave birth to another poor person of color who, because of his parents and his social location, well, he had all the odds stacked against him. So, with all of that in the mix, I completely understand why she was trying to figure out what it all means.

And, when I think about it like that, well, maybe I've got more in common with this story than I thought. I mean, I'm "throwing around" in my head what kind of year this has been. We've seen environmental shifts with wildfires in Australia and California along with the most active Atlantic hurricane season on record. // Our lives continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 along with varied individual and communal responses to the pandemic. // So too, we've watched hundreds of years of inequality, racism, and privilege reach a boiling point. And, we will never be able to forget the names of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. Add to that the changes we have experienced on the supreme court, to elections, and to politics in general and these are things that will be impact us for generations to come. // Like Mary treasured all those things in her heart, or to translate it from the Greek a bit differently, like Mary observed all sorts of things that had happened, so have we. And I too am pondering, or "throwing around," all these things in my heart. I'm trying to figure out what in the heck happened? Or, how I just began to realize what was always right in front of me?

And, maybe Mary felt that way too. Maybe, that night she tossed a few things around in her brain as baby Jesus drifted off to sleep. As she rested, maybe she glanced over to check that Jesus was still breathing. And, as she winced with the pain, I imagine she was taken back to the time when her life changed forever. The moment when the messenger, or the angel, appeared and said, “do not be afraid.” So too, perhaps, she remembered Zechariah’s story when he, too, was greeted by a messenger who said, “do not be afraid.” And perhaps she thought that it was odd that, again, right after her son was born, the shepherds, heard a messenger say, “do not be afraid.” I imagine that she was moved by this repetition. That repeated phrase that came at every moment when the world felt off-kilter. The phrase that came at the moment when the future seemed unclear. The phrase that is spoken to, well, you and me.

You see, that same phrase that Mary, Zacharia, and the shepherds heard, that phrase is for us. And, it’s a phrase that Jesus will repeat throughout Luke’s gospel. It’s a phrase that reminds us that in that manger there is food. For, like animals are given sustenance from the food in a manger, so too, you and I, we gain our strength from what Mary placed in that manger. The gift within that manger is not only the best model we have for loving our neighbor, but so too, Christ’s presence is incarnate among us tonight.

And, that all strikes me different tonight. Afterall, there are so many things this pandemic has taught me. But one thing that sticks out to me most this night is that incarnation is risky. That is, God taking on human form is risky. And, being human is risky and filled

with complexity and uncertainty. But, the voice of the messenger rings out reminding us to “fear not.” And to be clear, the voice is not saying be reckless, be careless, and do whatever you want. No, whatever voice that is *not* God’s voice. Rather, God’s voice says, “fear not” for I have been, will be, and am with you through it all.

You see, it’s a fearlessness that is rooted in the arch of God’s story. A fearlessness that acknowledges God’s gifts to humankind– the gifts of wisdom and reason along with the ability to share knowledge and to use science to learn about God’s creation. It’s the fearlessness that allows medical workers to put on appropriate protective gear to care for those dying of COVID. It’s a fearlessness rooted in God’s gift of self-control so that we can work to build a future that is best for all. It’s that fearlessness that reminds us that although we are separated tonight during these holy of times, God is with us and we will be together again. You see, ultimately, this fearlessness comes from God’s abundant love for you, for me, and for all creation.

And, with all of that said, if you’re anything like me, you’re probably tossing around in your head what this whole 2020 thing has been. And it’ll probably take a lifetime to figure it out. But, tonight, God reminds us to “fear not.” Fear not what will come, for God has bestowed us with gifts to weather the storm. Fear not for God loves us enough to risk it all in human form so that we can have abundant life. Fear not for our God is with us, and that’s why Christ is named Immanuel. Fear not, dear friend. Merry Christmas, and Amen.