

“Prayerful Pondering”

A Sermon on Luke 2:1-20

First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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In 1843 Charles Dickens wrote a story. He called it "A Christmas Carol." And he prefaced the story with these words. "I have endeavored," he wrote, "in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea which shall not, I trust, put my readers out of humor, with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly ..." And it has, hasn't it. It's haunted our houses, our bookshelves, our stages and our screens quite pleasantly for almost two centuries now. And for many of us, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without it.

But I've noticed something about the "Christmas Carol" over the years. Whenever I read it or see it played out again, even though I know the story well, I always seem to hear something in it that sticks in my mind. So this year, for instance, as I was thinking about what I wanted to say to all of you tonight, I wasn't surprised when I found my mind going back again and again to the last words in the story.

After his hauntings and his resolution to start a new life, "Scrooge," the narrator says, "was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. To Tiny Tim, who didn't die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, as good a man, as the good old city ever knew ... And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

Now I know, you've read those words or heard them, I don't know how many times before, but have you ever thought to yourself, as I've been thinking to myself for a while now, "Is that what I do? Do I really 'keep Christmas?'"

You see, I've got a feeling that many of us don't. We don't know how. So we don't "keep Christmas." Instead, we just "celebrate it." We decorate. We cook. We wrap. Then we get together. We unwrap. We eat. We take down the decorations. And Christmas is gone till next year. Because, well because, we don't know how to keep it. We don't know how to hold on to it. We don't possess the knowledge.

It's interesting though, in his account of the Gospel, Luke says Mary does. In fact he describes her in almost the same way that Dickens describes Scrooge at the end of the "Christmas Carol." For in the last few sentences of Luke's Christmas story in chapter 2, Luke says Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The link between Luke's line and the line that Dickens wrote has seemed obvious to most of those who've studied Dickens. It's even more obvious when you realize that the version of Luke that Dickens would have read uses the word "keep" instead of the word "treasured." The King James translation of Luke 2:19 says Mary "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart."

But I like the word "treasured." Because when I treasure something, I do more than just keep it. The things I treasure have more value to me than the things I just keep around. And their value often comes from the fact that they show me just how much someone else treasures me.

On my left hand, for instance I'm wearing a ring. It's my wedding ring. I've been wearing for nineteen years now. Next year it'll be twenty. And it's one of my treasures. So let me tell you it's story. You see the ring I wear is a one of my treasures because it's not a ring I bought for myself. It's a ring that was given to me. When my wife and I got married, this ring was given to me by Carolyn's family.

It had belonged originally to her grandfather. And he had worn it, the family told me the hand that Carolyn remembered holding when she was a little girl. She had always admired the ring and the single diamond in its center. Her grandfather told her it was there to remind him of her grandmother, and how much he loved her. She was at the center of his life.

So when I received the ring, Carolyn's family told me the story. They asked me to wear it and to let it remind me of how much they loved having me as a their new son in law and how much they hoped the ring they gave me would work in the same way for me that it had for Carolyn's grandfather. And now that you know the story behind my wedding ring, I imagine you can understand better why I treasure it.

And I'll bet you have treasures in your life too, treasures that show you just how much someone else treasures you. Gifts that were given to you with a story. And it's not only the gift. It's the story that goes along with it that turns the gift into a treasure, isn't it?

And it was that way for Mary too, that first Christmas night. For she too received a gift from God, the gift of a baby boy. But along with the gift came a

story, a story told to her by shepherds. A story about an angel who suddenly appeared to them while they were watching their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem.

A story about what the angel had said to them. "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the city of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord."

That was the story. And that night it came along with the gift. And Luke says from the time the shepherds finished their story, Mary treasured it. She treasured every piece of it. And we can too. In fact we need to. For the story is more than just a story God meant Mary to hear. It's a story God means you to hear and me too. Because you see, we're the people the story is addressing. We're part of the "all" in the angel's story. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." Those were his words. And "all people" includes all of us, my friends. It truly does.

So receive the gift of the Christ child tonight, just like Mary and Joseph did that first Christmas night. But then do even more. Receive the story that comes along with the gift. Listen to it, learn it, remember it and treasure it. For "today in the city of David a Savior has been born to ..."

Have you ever stopped? Tell me have you ever stopped right there as you're reading the Christmas story? Have you ever stopped when you come to a word in the shepherd's story that refers to you and put your name into the story? If you haven't you've been missing something. You see personalizing the story is one of the oldest and best ways to ponder the story and see its meaning for your life. Christians have been doing since at least the second century.

So let me show you how to do it. Ponder for a moment with me this evening.. I'll read you the words of the shepherd's story once more. Only this time, as I read them to you I'll pause. Each time I pause I'll invite you to think your name into the story. And together we'll ponder the meaning of all these things for our lives.

And the angel said to the shepherds "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be" (and put your name in here. Imagine just for a moment that the joy the angel is talking about, the joy that comes with the birth of this child is really meant to come to you too). And now let's go on "For today in the city of David, a Savior has been born to (and put your name in here too for the word you in the text is a plural you and it means "all of you. So put your name in here too and remember that a Savior has born to you) "and to all people."

And perhaps now you can sense it. You can sense how much God treasures you that he would give you not only the gift but tell you the story that lies behind the gift. And the truth is it's all about you. It's all about God's love for you. It's all about God's desire to bring you good news and great joy. It's all about God's willingness to be your Savior and save you from the sins in your life that could separate you from Him. It's all about his desire to be your Messiah, your King, your Lord."

But now the question comes up, what will you do? Will you treasure the story and the knowledge that comes with it. Will you ponder on it more than just once here tonight? Will you let it transform the way you understand God, and yourself, and other people all around you like the story in the Christmas Carol transformed Scrooge? Will you learn how to keep Christmas this year or just celebrate it and let it go again?

I pray you'll keep it. I pray you'll treasure it. I pray you'll ponder it often and let the knowledge of how God treasures you sink deep into your heart and your soul. He has sent you good news of great joy. He has sent His own Son to be your Savior, your Messiah and your Lord. I pray that the story will stay with you tonight and every night during the new year. So that it can be said of you and me and all of us that we truly knew how to keep Christmas well. Merry Christmas everyone.

Let's pray