

“With Mary, Pondering”

Luke 2:15-20

Luke 2:19 – “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in our heart.”

Pondering is one of my favorite things to do. Christmas morning is an especially good time to take some time to ponder.

Some of us, who pondered during our elementary school days, were accused by teachers of day dreaming. In high school, some of us escaped the boredom of the classroom by rambling around in a favorite thought or emotion. But then we had to pay for college class time, so we became self disciplined and only allowed “ponder-breaks” during study time. Our minds wandered everywhere and in those days, probably ended up in the neighborhood of romance.

During our school days, we were cultivating one of the most important skills in life. We were warming up for the kind of mystical journeying that leads a human spirit to God. The pondering self is an opening for God to come into our thoughts and hearts.

At the risk of being called sexist, I think that pondering is a particularly feminine thing to do. While my wife totally loses herself in pondering with her eyes staring off into a distant place, I am more likely to think, plan, analyze, evaluate, propose, and determine. But sometimes my feminine side breaks through and I find myself just pondering.

Mary is the person in the Bible who teaches us to ponder, and we learn from her that pondering is a good way to unlock the mystery of God’s will for us, and how to submit to God’s will for us.

Mary is an important part of the Christmas story, not only because she has the female lead in the drama of the Word become flesh, but also because of what she is, as a person of faith.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, there are many Mary festivals that celebrate her life and her unique relationship to Christ, but Protestants have always been reluctant to give her much time. We fear that people will be tempted to worship her instead of Christ, or that we will put too much emphasis on her role in salvation. But Mary is our best biblical model of willing obedience. She never came up with excuses. We learn from her the joy of submission to the will of God.

Submission to the will of God. Submissiveness is a misunderstood virtue these days. I think people imagine that they will lose their own identities or they will miss out on good times if they are too submissive to God and so they try to negotiate a compromise between God's will and their own. Or we sometimes think, and I include myself here, that we can accomplish submissiveness to God by spending the day working in the food pantry or a sermon written and ready to be preached.

Rather, submission to the will of God, is a life-long discipline that is rooted and grows in humility, prayer, listening, and pondering – as well as an agreement to be close kin to the foolish, the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned. Submission to the will of God is usually interpreted by the world as weakness because we are transferring power from the self to the other. Mary teaches that when submission to God is let loose to race with other self-

centered styles of living, it pulls easily ahead into the victory of joy and justice.

Submissiveness to God is an unmistakable sign of great faith.

Mary had great faith and I even imagine that she needed plenty of “ponder-breaks” to comprehend what it meant to be the mother of the Messiah. Before the visit from Gabriel, her existence was no doubt normal and predictable – a small home on a dusty street, repetitious daily chores, the sun rising and setting everyday on a simple life. But suddenly the simple and quiet life became a prelude for the moment when God reached into history by reaching into her virgin womb. For her, it was as much a death as a beginning; the death of her present existence as well as the beginning of her eternal and mysterious identity as the woman who bore Christ. It is easy to lose sight of how radically her life was changed because she never whined about the difficulties and we move quickly into the story of Christ.

When Mary was initially visited by Gabriel, her first instinct was to “consider in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.” From the beginning, Mary was pondering. She knew she needed some time to ponder the message of this angel sent by God. Although she was troubled, she agreed to embrace God’s plan. She submitted to his will and she said, “Let it be.” She took into herself the word of the angel, the Word of God, so she would ponder on it and let it grow.

After Gabriel’s visit, Mary hurried to a relationship of human love and understanding to find support and to share the news. Although pondering is mostly a private thing to do, women seem to know that sharing life helps to make sense of it and helps to ease the burden. Elizabeth, too, had a story to tell and an unexpected pregnancy. There was lot to talk about.

It was with Elizabeth that Mary found the words to express an understanding of God's purpose, and her haunting Magnificat is not only an outburst of joy, but a clear statement that justice is always part of God's plan. After a song to marvel at her favor with God, and her vision of God's will for the world, she turned then to the new life growing within her.

Astonishment must have lined all the days they spent together, and it was during the 3 months with Elizabeth that Mary was sustained and prepared for the years to come. We know nothing about the details of these 3 months; after the early conversations there is silence. But the quiet signals courage, and Mary lived a quiet courage for the rest of her life.

Turning points seem to be the times when people need to do the most pondering. Mary's turning point was obvious – a virgin becoming pregnant with the Son of God. Our turning points are usually not so obvious. Sometimes we are unaware of turning points and messages from God because they are buried under the normal happenings of normal days, hidden in places where we would never guess to look for them. But when we take more time to ponder, as Mary did, we discover the turns and directions that God wants us to find.

The Greek word that most scholars translate as “ponder,” gives a fuller explanation of Mary's way of knowing God. It means literally, “to put together.” So the Greek tells us that Mary took all of the many parts of her life – her thoughts, her observations, her visions, and her knowledge of being chosen as mother of the Christ, and constantly “brought them together” in her heart, to help her understand what was happening, and what it meant. She pulled everything into her pondering self and held them together until they began to speak to one another, and

speak to her, and take shape as the body of god's will for her life. It takes a lot of energy to ponder that intentionally and it takes a lifetime.

Every now and then I lose sight of the model of Mary and slip into a busyness that leaves no time for pondering. If things are going well and I'm accomplishing my tasks, I often think I shouldn't ponder so much. After all, it was while pondering that I make a wrong turn, didn't get a shot at the pheasant that got up right beside me, and earned a reputation as a man sometimes oblivious to children seeking my attention. Pondering separates me from the concrete world.

But when I stop taking time to ponder, a feeling of emptiness comes into my time, as frightening as a deep, dry well. All of those tasks completed, make a wall that rises up between me and God, and there are no openings to make connections or feel the nudges that come my way. If I try to fix the problem by pondering on the run, it's like giving my wife a kiss on the run – it holds me for awhile, but I miss the lingering and regular attention needed to flourish, and intimacy with God needs pondering.

Join with me in 2011 to take time to read the Bible daily, to pray daily, to ponder daily.

I suspect that it is not only a mistake to worship Mary, but also a way of missing the most important lesson she teaches. When we see her humanity clearly, then we begin to learn. There are only a few clues from scripture, but they are clear enough to teach the power of Mary's faith. We learn from her that pondering was the tool for getting through the tough times and discerning God's will. It is easy to see that claiming Mary as a model for how we live, is a

good thing to do. The hard part is remembering to remember her throughout the year, and finding ways to keep close to her insights about life in relationship to God. It requires both discipline and letting go, but when we do that, there is an amazing gift: Mary teaches us how to have Christ in us, and on this Christmas that's the most important lesson of all --- Having Christ in us.

May the peace of God . . .

ELW #396 – What Child Is This