



ST ALBANS

Ponder This

The Rev. Simone Hurkmans

December 24, 2021, Christmas Eve

I'm going to share with you one of my favourite stories about my husband John's childhood. And I've cleared this with him, don't worry. John's the youngest of four siblings. When he was little, his oldest sister Elaine put out a tape recorder on Christmas Eve. She turned it on to record before she went to bed. The next morning, all the kids were super excited to go down and listen to what was on the tape. But to their utter disappointment, somehow their parents learned that there had been a tape recorder. And they confiscated the tape. It was never listened to, and never discussed again. No one knows what happened to the tape.

As the years went by, each of the Hurkmans kids in turn learned that life-changing truth that we all eventually learn. And as they learned this they no longer needed to listen to the tape. Their world was changed forever.

"But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." She treasured the words the shepherds told her. She pondered them in her heart. This is what really stood out for me in this evening's story. What does it mean for Mary to treasure words and ponder them in her heart? Why is this important? Why would the writer of Luke's Gospel include this short sentence? When the story was written, likely around the year 80, women were considered property, and so were children and slaves. So why would the writer bother telling us that Mary spent time treasuring and pondering things in her heart? Each detail is important, especially when it's assigned to someone of so little standing back then.

First, the writer includes this detail because it means that Mary is more than just a vessel. Mary is an active participant in the story. A few months ago I showed a painting of a breastfeeding Mary. Madonna del Leche, do you remember? I love this image because it shows the human side of the incarnation. Mary actively parenting. Mary actively caring for Jesus in a physical, nurturing, real way. Actually feeding God on earth. Amazing.



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Second, as I thought about more about the treasuring and the pondering, my sense was that there was something fishy about this pondering business. When I think of the word “ponder”, I think ruminates. Thinking about something deeply and a lot. I thought to myself, does this make sense in this context? Mary’s just finished giving birth to her first baby. She’s in a stable. There are shepherds hanging around. And she’s pondering? I don’t know about the moms present tonight, but were you doing much pondering shortly after delivery? I sure wasn’t. I was exhausted and relieved and a little scared. But I certainly wasn’t pondering.

In the name of investigating this fishiness, I went back to the original Greek text. The Greek verb that was translated “ponder” is “sumballo”. It means “to throw together”. To throw together. “Sumballo” is found a total of six times in the New Testament. The only time it’s translated “ponder” is in the passage we heard this evening. This confirmed my intuition of fishiness. The other five times it’s used, it’s translated: “to meet”, “to confer”, or “to encounter”.

What if “pondered” is more about encountering something new rather than thinking about something a lot? I can ponder how much I love knitting. I can ponder a beautiful piece of art. I can ponder the laws of thermodynamics. But when I encounter knitting, when I encounter a beautiful piece of art, when I encounter the laws of thermodynamics, it’s something completely different, isn’t it?

Mary is encountering the idea that her baby, her brand-new baby, is the Messiah, the chosen one, the Son of God. She’s not ruminating on it like she would a theological text or IKEA assembly instructions. She’s encountering it. She’s meeting this new information, these new facts. This past week Georgina said that part of pondering is accepting that you don’t understand something. Like John and his siblings, they meet this new reality about Christmas. Like us in the face of yet another stage of the pandemic, we’re encountering a new reality that we don’t quite understand.

Mary’s processing it. Yes, she’s heard it in the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel comes to her. But this is real now. Here is her baby, flesh and blood. Hungry.



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Crying. What does it all mean for Mary? Who is this baby? Who is she now that she knows this new truth?

John suggested a few years ago that it wasn't only Jesus who was born on this night. Mary too was born on this night. Mary as we know her now was born that night.

And what about us? Here comes the hard part. There's always a hard part. We are being invited to be born this night too. And this language is hard for some of us. Being born again. Can we hold this language in a new way? What are we being invited to ponder? To encounter? To meet? Just as Mary isn't simply an empty vessel used by God. We aren't just passive robots to whom faith happens. We have a role to play.

I don't think I've ever quoted a pope in my sermons. But there's always a first time, so here goes. Pope Leo the Great, born in 440, said that: "through this wonderful blessing the mystery of new birth shone upon us, so that by the same Spirit through which Christ was conceived and brought forth we too might be born again in a spiritual birth".

It's a huge challenge. We spend our days trying to get through our to-do lists. We hear the Christmas message. Yadda-yadda-yadda. Did I put the turkey in the sink to thaw? Or what I am going to do with the huge turkey I bought? We miss the point. The 2,000-year-old reality that's only new if we stop long enough to ponder it. To meet it. To encounter it. God coming to dwell among us in human form. God in Jesus living and dying and being resurrected among us. For us. God giving us God's spirit to live inside each of us. Right now. It's huge. I had a priest mentor who never said "Merry Christmas", always "Happy Feast of the Incarnation!"

Just for good measure, I will leave you on this Christmas Eve with a second quote from Pope Leo. He says: "If we are indeed the temple of God and if the Spirit of God lives in us, then what every believer has within themselves is greater than what they admire in the skies." What every believer has within themselves is greater than



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what they admire in the skies. Accepting that truth is what it means to be born again in a spiritual birth. Amen.