

## Treasuring

Luke 2:41-52

It is hard to imagine how things could go downhill so quickly after a joyous and glorious Christmas. Only the story of Herod slaughtering the innocents makes people cringe more than this story does. Parents and social workers alike are mortified at the thought of losing a 12 year old boy in the big city, and then getting almost all the way home before they notice he's gone. I've heard friends from large families tell about how one of the kids was accidentally left at a gas station or rest stop while they were on a trip, but not noticing you've got a kid missing until the next day seems inexcusable.

Biblical scholars fall all over themselves to assure us that Mary and Joseph really weren't unfit to be the parents of our Lord. It is true that by the time their oldest was 12 they probably did have other children, quite likely a large number of them, and so it is entirely possible that a child's absence could be overlooked. But there is a more likely scenario – people traveled in large groups back then when they went to Jerusalem for the Passover and other festivals – neighbors, family, friends, and like today, what 12 year old wants to be seen with his parents if there are other options?

What is unsettling, though, is the conversation that ensued. After turning around and heading back and scouring the city for him, they finally find Jesus in the temple where he is amazing the teachers with questions and insights far advanced for someone his age; perhaps even someone their own age. Mary gives Jesus the traditional and standard parental tongue-lashing. Instead of telling him what he did was bad, wrong, and what huge trouble he's going to get in when they get home, she goes for pathos and guilt; make the kid feel bad: don't you know how frightened your father and I were? We thought something terrible had happened to you. Don't scare us like that ever again!

And Jesus' response: Why were you frightened? And for that matter why are you so upset that I didn't come home with you? Didn't you know that I'd be here, learning my father's business? Jesus has not only made his first bold move towards independence, he has made what might well be his first bold statement about himself. Mary has said, your father and I were afraid, meaning Joseph. Jesus has said he has to do his father's work, meaning God. And they didn't get it.

But they didn't forget it, either. At least Mary didn't. They went home, and Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.”

Mary's heart was filling up fast. After the shepherds visited their little make-shift nursery and told Mary and Joseph about the angels and what they had said, that a savior, a messiah had been born, Mary treasured their words, too, and pondered them in her heart. And now Jesus' words. You have to do that sometimes, when something happens that you don't really understand, when someone says something that you don't get, you have to ponder them, treasure them in your heart, think about them, turn them over, save them up, live with them, until some day when it makes sense. Some day when you finally understand, or begin to understand.

As accommodating as Mary was when Gabriel first came to see her, as willing as she was to be the handmaiden of God, she couldn't possibly have understood what it really meant. She couldn't have understood then who this baby was to be and what he would do. And even 12 years later, 12 pretty normal years later, probably, it had still never been spelled out for her. No one had actually said the words, “Son of God,” to her. Jesus didn't go around the house grumbling that he was “God incarnate,” and that he shouldn't have to dust or run the vacuum. No one had ever filled in all those blanks in her mind and said why, exactly, his birth was good

news of great joy for all the world, not just Israel, but all the world. It had never been fully spelled out to her that this baby that she was carrying, this son she gave birth to in a stable and was raising wasn't just a baby, a boy, an adolescent, but God. The birth of a baby is always exciting, even when it happens under less than ideal circumstances. Angel visits are always exciting, if not alarming, but what did it all mean?

Mary wasn't the only one left to ponder those same, weighty thoughts. A baby was born in a manger, some 2,000 years ago. Angels proclaimed, shepherds came, gifts were given, and still are. But what does it all mean? What does it mean that God came to earth and was born as a frail, helpless baby? That he grew up and lived a life not so different from yours and mine? What is it that we are actually celebrating at Christmas?

It isn't always clear to us right off the bat. We celebrate the nativity, but sometimes it takes us decades of pondering, years of treasuring, years of living life to even begin to understand what is so significant about Christmas, the Incarnation, God being born in a baby.

This morning I've asked someone who has been pondering the significance of Christmas for a long time to help finish preaching this sermon: Alan Lewis.

### **PONDERING CHRISTMAS**

Do we ever "ponder" what Christmas means to us? Why did God become a man?

Some believe Jesus came as a fulfillment of prophecy. Some believe He came for our salvation: through Jesus' death on the cross we can be children of God! Maybe it's both reasons -- maybe there's more...

I think God came to be with us. To know us deeply. To know the world from our point of view. But He came -- mostly -- to be with us, here, where we are.

Most of you know that for many years my mother suffered from a form of dementia called Alzheimer's disease. Early on in her "battle", Debbie and I found out this would become both challenging, and rewarding. Sometimes, it would even become humorous: did you know you that your Mom could wear seven slippers at one time, and then roll her eyes and smile at you after she saw someone else who wasn't "properly" dressed!

But things change, they always do: In the last few years I'm not sure Mom knew who I was (maybe I was her friend?). She did know if I was being kind to her, but she didn't know, or seem to understand, what I was saying to her, and she didn't communicate back much. Thoughts and ideas were slow going in, and even slower coming out. But every three months or so, she would speak a complete sentence. The most treasured was her statement that she said, slowly, "I appreciate everything you do for me." It was as if God was saying, "Keep on doing what you've been doing."

Yes, God was with us in the nursing home. He was ever-present in those beautiful souls who cared for Mom in every imaginable way, and with a love for her, that for the most part, was not returned -- just like -- God's "agape" love. In life, if you're blessed, you get to know people who do God's work; and if you're really blessed, you get to know people who actually personify God. It's been my view, through all these years with Mom, that God laughed with us, when we laughed, and He cried with us, when we cried. Yes, God is with us! He is with us all, right now. He is with us this Christmas season, and He'll be with us every other time of the year!

If I may, I'd like to add a "P.S.":

Recently, we spent a week with our young grandsons, who are fairly "recent" examples of God's creation. It was great! (I think Sam would say "awesome".) And we've spent a month now, without one of His earlier creations. Mom finally won her battle with Alzheimer's -- she made it HOME. It had been her first priority for the last 15 years. We both ponder, and treasure, our time with her.

And we rejoice! We rejoice that God is with us all...here...right now!