

Holy Advent: Holy Pondering
Luke 1:26-38, 2:19 & Joshua 1:1-9
December 10, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

People sometimes ask me how long it takes to prepare and write a sermon. That seems like it shouldn't be a hard question to answer. Some experts say a preacher should spend an hour in preparation for every minute of preaching. That's 10-15 hours. But I have no idea. I don't know how long it took me to prepare or write this sermon, or last week's, or any other. I can tell you what my process generally is, but I can't tell you how many hours it takes me. Generally speaking, I look at the week's lectionary readings on Sunday afternoon or Monday. I hope and pray that the Spirit sends me a glimmer of an idea, as I read them. At the very least, I pray that one passage will stand out among the others, figuratively jumping up and down saying "Pick me! Pick me!" Then I put the bulletin together. In the best weeks, the prayers and readings and hymns all complement the sermon. At this point in the process, I'm texting back and forth with David to choose hymns. Sometimes I can tell him exactly where I think the sermon will go, but often my messages include something like "I have no idea where this one is going."

Ideally, by Tuesday, those steps will be complete, and I start reading and studying the passage. I like to be at least somewhat prepared for a first thing Wednesday morning zoom with some preacher friends from several denominations. As I've told you before, we compare notes, ask questions, chase rabbit trails, and help each other clarify where we're each going with our sermon.

All of that is quantifiable. If I were so inclined, I could count the time I spend doing those things, Sunday afternoon through Wednesday morning. From then on is where things get fuzzier. For the next several days, I ponder. I think about the passage. Sometimes consciously, sometimes it's just simmering on the back burner of my mind as I do other things, talk to people, read something unrelated, walk the dog, drive somewhere. You know those dryers they have at the laundromat, with the windows in the doors? You can see your clothes tumbling around as they dry. That's what I picture is happening with the sermon in the latter half of the week. Ideas, stories, snippets of phrases, structures, all tumbling around in the dryer, touching each other, then reconfiguring and touching each other in a different way.

By the time I finally sit down to write, it sometimes can come pretty quickly. If I've had enough time and mental space to ponder, it comes together into a sermon, and I sit down and type and it's done pretty fast, fast enough to annoy the preacher I live with. The pondering step is key, and it's hard to explain, but I know if it gets short-changed, because I sit in front of a blank screen and watch the cursor blink for far too long.

Now, I don't want to presume to compare myself to Mary's pondering, but I will say that I'm pleased to know a fellow ponder-er. The things she was pondering were more weighty for her than a weekly sermon is for me. Her pondering has long caught my eye, and I wanted to explore it a little bit today.

We first encounter Mary's pondering, when Gabriel appears to her and says, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you." She is much perplexed, and *pondered* what sort of greeting this might be.

After all that Gabriel told her has come to pass, and the baby is born, and the shepherds have come to worship, and share all they had heard and seen, Luke tells us, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

And another piece that we didn't read, but it comes shortly afterward in Luke, at the end of chapter 2. The 12 year old Jesus has stayed behind in the Temple, scaring his parents. When they find him, he says "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" They return home, and Luke tells us something similar: Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

It would be quite helpful to my sermon, if Luke had happened to use the same word for all these times he's describing Mary's pondering, but no. He doesn't. It's three different words. One of them is a sort of "dialoguing internally" word, an inner considering of something. One is more literally a "treasuring," or "keeping carefully." But the middle one, this is a lovely word. *Symballo* is the verb. *Sym* meaning together, think of "symbiosis" meaning living together, or "sympathetic," meaning feeling together. So "together" plus *ballo*, which means "throw." Mary threw these things together in her heart. Enough like throwing things in the dryer and watching them tumble around, that I'm definitely feeling a kinship with Mary. Mary is letting things tumble together in her heart, in the very center of her being.

Our pondering, though. I do expect some of you are ponder-ers. What makes pondering different from meditating, what makes pondering different from fretting and worrying? What makes pondering pondering? What makes it holy pondering? As you can tell, I've been pondering pondering this week.

The Joshua scripture records God's words to Joshua, to meditate on the book of the law day and night. The Psalmist meditates on God's promises, which relates back to last week's idea of holy keeping. Meditation seems a little different to me, more focused. Joshua is meditating on the law. The Psalmist is meditating on God's promises. And at least as we use meditation today, it's something completely separate from normal activity. Meditation brings to mind a quiet space, silence, with the aim of quieting the mind.

Pondering, on the other hand, seems to take place within everyday life. Mary ponders while she's caring for an infant, and then for a teenage boy, while she's taking care of the long list of tasks she had as a woman in ancient society. We can ponder while we're doing any number of other things. And our pondering isn't meant to clear our minds, as much as it is to mull things over, throw them around together, see what insights may arise.

Pondering can easily degenerate into fretting, at least in my experience. If we go back to the dryer comparison, fretting happens when there's too much stuff in my brain, too many clothes crammed in the dryer, and they can't tumble around and bounce off each other to get dry. Fretting means that I need to let go of something or things, to make some more space. That's way easier said than done. I imagine that Mary, being human, fretted some. But Luke portrays her in these passages differently. Her pondering does not avoid hard things, but her pondering leaves her at peace.

And that leads me to the last thing I want to say about pondering, and this is another difference from meditating. Meditation has a goal of insight or understanding, some new epiphany. Pondering doesn't seem to have a goal. Pondering tolerates not getting answers, not arranging things in a tidy fashion. Pondering is at peace, like Mary is, with the complexities and complications of life. Mary's pondering about what sort of greeting this might be doesn't allow her to avoid the enormous change that Gabriel announces. Mary's pondering in her heart about the baby and the shepherds doesn't allow her to avoid the enormous challenge of raising the Son of God. Mary's treasuring Jesus's growing wisdom doesn't allow her to avoid the pain of losing him to the cross. Her pondering doesn't give her easy answers or enlightenment or an escape from real life.

It's just pondering, throwing together ideas and experiences and coming to a certain peace about them, even if things aren't turning out the way we would have hoped.

Pondering becomes holy when we entrust our pondering to the Holy One, as Mary did. Our pondering becomes holy pondering when we aren't looking for answers as much as we're looking to have company along the way.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Advent, to ponder as Mary did, to trust your pondering to the Holy One.