

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

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In a little town of perhaps a hundred persons, in a peasant home in a room where animals were kept because other guests in better rooms would have socially outranked them, in a manger where sustenance was to be found for animals and soon to be discovered for the world itself, in that particularity the real bearer of the earth's peace was born.

The first to validate this birth and the peace associated with it were heavenly angels singing glory to God in the highest. On earth shepherds busy with other affairs gave it public recognition. In this way, the whole of inhabited creation gave validity to the Savior's birth.

Now it is an understatement to say that Mary would need to ponder all this in her heart." Twelve years later we still find her pondering when she and Joseph discovered Jesus in the Temple among the teachers listening to them and asking them questions. The fullness of Jesus' significance could not have been immediately apparent to her so Mary keeps mulling things over. Mary is a model believer and pondering is a fundamental aspect of Christian discipleship. We too need to continually mull over the significance of Jesus in our lives.

The Bible itself invites us to ponder. As we read our Bible we toss together where we happen to be in life with what the passage has to say to us. Then pondering them together may reveal a spiritual meaning. We may likely find a different spiritual sense the next time we read the same passage. Our life experience changes. As we ponder the passage we go deeper into an inexhaustible fountain of spiritual meaning. That is what it means to ponder the word of God.

Instead of a Christmas birth story the Gospel of John gives a poem. It starts, “In the beginning was the Word.” We ponder how God’s Word is born among us. How does God’s Word to us become God’s Word for us?

Pondering asks, how does that sit with us? What is coming to us in the breath of silence? The Bible’s book *The Wisdom of Solomon* has this intriguing passage, “When all things were in quiet silence, and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word leaped down from heaven’s royal throne.” We are encouraged to ponder who it is that is coming to us when the present celebration quiets down in this night’s silence.

Pondering is helped by using what is called a beginner’s mind. Thomas Traherne, a 17th century Anglican priest and poet describes this as though it were the first months of childhood. “All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful...” We have heard the Christmas story over and over so that its meaning is ingrained in our heads. We know what comes next and take it as a matter of course. But what if we allow the story to appear new, and strange, and inexpressibly rare? What if we allow ourselves to hear and experience the story as if for the first time like Mary herself? I don’t think we can hear the story aright, nor can we effectively ponder it without using our beginner’s mind. Then the meaning we discover will delight us.

So let’s ponder. Let’s try to hear the story as though for the first time. What is it that we ourselves bring to the story? Has it been a hard year? Has the year been beautiful? We’re just being descriptive, not judging. Do we have a community that supports and encourages us? Have we let community slide in life, like the shepherds, that is we are busy with other matters? Again just be in the moment. Don’t let judgment creep in. What is it of our lives that we bring tonight to toss together with this talk of God’s appearing that together yields spiritual meaning?

Ponder this. We see dominating authorities pushing the poor around, scattering refugees, destroying the vulnerable with gunfire. Toss this together with the authoritarian Caesar Augustus and his Roman forces ordering this peasant couple to leave their home, and Mary being great with child. It could not have been an easy journey. The way, however, led from coercion to

freedom, from sorrow to salvation. That is one possible spiritual meaning a person could find.

Ponder the lack of space. There was no room in the inn. Do we give ourselves space to reflect or are we too preoccupied? Do we allow God room to rest in our hearts or do we close the door, perhaps out of guilt? A spiritual meaning is that love wants to occupy that space, a love that erases guilt, a love that allows our letting go, a superabundant, out-of-this-world love! Give it room.

Ponder the manger. The manger is mentioned three times in the story signaling its importance. How significant is it for us to intentionally place ourselves at a spot where we can be fed, spiritually? The manger is full of biblical resonances. The prophet Isaiah reasons, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” It may be that we are not as self-sufficient as we thought. There is a greater power whose wisdom feeds us if we but turn to the crib.

What about peace? The angels say, “on earth peace among those whom God favors!” This makes it clear that peace is God’s to give. The gift of peace is all grace. How few years of peace there have been in any of our lifetimes. Peace is beyond what we can attain on our own. The key to peace is the prince of peace, so little, so common, so easily overlooked. This is all tossed together as we ponder the meaning of this night.

Ponder Jesus as the gateway to a mended world. Isaiah pushes us with a double imperative, “Go through, go through the gates...” What is holding us back? Jesus would teach, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (10: 9). Go through the gate who is Jesus. Ponder what you will find.

Now, finally, ponder the dissonance between the promise and the present reality. The oppressors are still oppressing. Mourners still mourn. Refugees continue to seek refuge. Again and again we find ourselves preoccupied, no matter how we yearn for a quiet mind and an open heart. We hold ourselves back from going through to a promised future, for fear of what might be on the other side of the gate. Ponder the dissonance.

The point of Jesus' birth is that the world not stay as it is. His birth leads to rebirth. This is not to ignore the present reality and also not to limit everything to what is. There is in Jesus' birth a promise of freedom and peace, of stillness and sustenance. It is our hope, not a passive wishing but an active striving. Push through the gate. Let's ponder what can be.

So let me wish you Merry Christmas with a beginner's mind. Let the wish appear new to you, maybe even strange to you, so that you mull over its meaning. Wherever you are in your life, Merry Christmas. Let the story of Christ's birth meet you in this present moment. Like Mary, ponder the meaning as you toss your story and Christ's together. You will find a rare peace and delightful stillness in this celebration of an infant's birth and an infinite God. Merry Christmas.

Amen.