

**“Treasuring Up & Pondering”**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
**December 21, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

Christmas is just a few days away. We’ll hear this morning from the Christmas story, in Luke 2:1-20. But our focus will be especially on verse 19.

And as we hear from this passage, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Luke writes:

<sup>2:1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup>And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup>to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup>And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

<sup>15</sup>When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup>And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup>And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Most Merciful God,  
As we approach the end of Advent,  
and the beginning of Christmas,  
help us to hear, and to take to heart,  
the incredible truths of Christmas.  
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake.  
Amen.

### **Introduction**

As we consider, this morning, the birth story of Jesus, there's a lot we could focus on. Last week Pastor Gutierrez focused on the experience of the shepherds. This morning, I want to focus on the experience of Mary.

Specifically, I want to focus in on verse 19, where we read: “But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

And as we consider that verse, one thing I think we see is that: While Christmas can be filled with worries, work, and weariness, God calls us to treasure up and ponder the astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth.

Let me say that again: While Christmas can be filled with worries, work, and weariness, God calls us to treasure up and ponder the astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth.

Let's break that down together.

### **Christmas Can Be Filled with Worries, Work, and Weariness**

First, we need to acknowledge that Christmas – and the Christmas season – can be filled with worries, work, and weariness.

With just four days to go before Christmas, I suspect many of you don't really need to be convinced of this. My guess is that a number of you, even now, while your bodies are here at church, your minds are on what's coming. If you're on the younger side, and others are organizing your Christmas experience, your mind might just be anticipating what's coming. But if you've got some responsibilities for this year's Christmas events, my guess is that that's where your head is. You're

going through your “to do” list. You’re remembering, maybe halfway through a hymn, something you forgot about that you need to add to that list. You’re thinking about gifts, and giftwrapping, and food prep, and ingredients, and cleaning the house, or finalizing decorations, or something else. Tasks and work may be filling your mind.

Or maybe, more than work, for you it’s worries. Maybe you feel a great deal of pressure, as Christmas approaches, to get everything perfect, and that pressure leads to a constant level of anxiety gnawing at your gut. Or maybe it’s more about a relationship. There’s a friend or family member you’ll see this Christmas, and things are a little tenuous, there’s been stress or strain or brokenness, and you’re worried about how things will go with them. Or maybe you’re not even sure what it is, but when you think of some of the events of the coming week, you just get that knot of worry in your stomach.

Work. Worries. But also weariness.

Many of you are already tired. You’ve been running, with extra events, extra preparations, extra shopping, extra needs, and you’re already exhausted, and if you’re honest, even though Christmas hasn’t happened yet, you feel like you already can’t wait for it to be over.

Work. Worries. Weariness. Each of those can fill our minds in this season.

Now, often, when we step back and reflect on those distractions, we tend to blame them on our particular cultural moment. And, of course, we do have our own unique cultural contributors these tendencies.

But we didn’t invent distraction around Christmas. It’s not new. In fact, the first Christmas was filled with distractions: with worries, with work, and with weariness.

We often imagine the first Christmas with these very idealistic images, with soft focus ... and quiet ... and peace ... but it’s hard to believe it was actually like that.

The Jews – the people of Mary and Joseph – were living under foreign occupation, as verse one reminds us – under the reign of Caesar Augustus. They are a people living under oppression. Tension and turmoil are in the air. There’s much to worry about.

And those international tensions are already affecting them personally in their day-to-day lives. Rome’s demand for a registration is what’s causing Mary and Joseph to have to travel during Mary’s pregnancy. As a result, she has to give birth away from home, away from what’s familiar. Whatever the details, this situation is probably not in line with Mary’s ideal birth plan. Both in the big picture of society and the small picture of their own lives, there is much for Mary to worry about.

Then there’s the work. A baby has just been born. And there aren’t nurses and doctors hovering around. Relatives may be present to help, but as some of you might remember, and as others of you are currently experiencing, there’s a lot to do with a newborn – a lot of care that’s needed.

And even more so in a world without central heat and modern conveniences. Tasks must have abounded for Mary that night.

And then there's the weariness. Traveling in the ancient world, on foot or on an animal, was not easy. Then, after arriving in Bethlehem, she gave birth – which I've never done, but which also seems like it can be quite exhausting.

That is the scenario of our text – the setting of the first Christmas: there are serious things to worry about, there are tasks to accomplish that are pressing and important, there is weariness from travel and then childbirth. The first Christmas, even more than ours, had worries, and work, and weariness.

And so by the time the shepherds show up, there are a lot of distractions, actually.

And let's remember, for Mary and Joseph, it's shepherds who show up, not angels. Mary and Joseph didn't get the bright light and the angels that night – they got the grungy night shift of shepherds, suddenly showing up at their door.

And amazing as their story was ... Mary had already seen an angel herself nine months earlier. And it might be cynical, but it's not impossible to imagine that in the midst of it all ... the worries, and the work, and the weariness could have taken over and dominated Mary's heart and mind that night.

It may have been a temptation for her. It's certainly a temptation for us: to let our hearts and minds be filled with work, worries and weariness at this time of year.

### **God Calls us to Treasure Up and Ponder**

But then the next thing we see is that that's not what Mary does. And as such, she serves as an example that God puts before us.

While Christmas can be filled with worries, work, and weariness, God calls us to treasure up and ponder the astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth.

We'll say more about the content of what we should be treasuring up and pondering ... but let's start with the actions themselves.

The first thing Mary does here is she has to listen to the testimony of others. She didn't see the angels that night. She didn't hear them. And contrary to so many Christmas cards, the Baby Jesus did not miraculously glow, as a constant reminder of his divinity. It had been nine months since Mary heard from the angel. What she got that first Christmas night was not an angel, but the testimony of a bunch of shepherds, about what God had told them.

In that way, her position is not that different from ours. We hear the testimony of others – just as she did. And the first thing we must do – like her – is to listen. To pay attention. To receive the

information that God has sent to us through others: in Mary's case it was through the shepherds, in our case it's through Luke who wrote these events down for us. [Green, 138]

Next, after receiving this information, we're told in verse 19 that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." That sounds nice. That sounds sweet. But what does it actually mean?

Well, let's start with "treasuring up" these things.

The Greek word used there could mean to "preserve" something [Matthew 9:17] or to "guard" or "protect" something [Mark 6:20]. In this context, it means "to keep" something in one's memory, or to keep it in mind, to pay attention to it. [TDNT 8:151; Evans, 208-209] The basic meaning of the root word is to keep something in view. [TDNT 8:140] And so Mary keeps this information in her view – she preserves it, she doesn't let it get pushed aside, but she actively keeps it in mind.

Despite all that was going on, Mary made an effort to keep these truths about Jesus in a prominent place in her mind. She treated it like treasure.

And we are called to do the same. In this season, when many other things vie for our attention, when worries and work and weariness all try to push other things from our view, we are called on to actively work, to keep the central truths of Christ's incarnation and birth in view.

That's part of it. But it's not all of it. Mary didn't just treasure and preserve this information. We're also told in verse 19 that she "pondered" it in her heart. What does that mean?

Well, the word used there means to bring things together. In this context it could mean to "puzzle over" – and could indicate either that Mary is baffled or that she's coming to an understanding [Evans, 208-209], or maybe, I suspect, a bit of both.

Interestingly, one commentator notes that some forms of the word used here for "pondering" could also mean "to engage with" either in battle [Luke 14:31] or in a dispute [Acts 17:18] [Evans, 208-209] And that might be especially helpful.

Because the idea of what Mary is doing here then, is not just this peaceful, serene reflection ... sitting back and quietly thinking "Well ... isn't that lovely?" No – it's thought that's engaged – that's even like battle – puzzling over what's been said, bringing different ideas together that seem to be at odds and forcing them to engage with one another, all in an attempt to get at a deeper understanding. Put differently, Mary wrestled with these ideas – she actively engaged with them to try to work out what they mean in general, and what they meant for her, specifically.

And that's the kind of engagement God calls us to with the Christmas story. It's engagement that doesn't just yawn through the retelling, but that actively wrestles with the astounding claims made ... that takes hold of the pieces that don't really make sense at first, and tries to bring them together – that puzzles and mentally battles over the implications of it all, for our lives, and for the life of the world.

That's what we're called to do with the story of Christmas. Like Mary, we're called to treasure up – to preserve and guard and keep in view the truths of Christ's incarnation and his birth. And as we keep them in view, we are also called on to wrestle with them, to actively ponder them, to lay hold of them and bring them together, and try to more deeply understand them. That's what we're called to here.

While Christmas can be filled with worries, work, and weariness, God calls us to treasure up and ponder the astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth.

### **The Astounding Truths of Christ's Incarnation and Birth**

OK. Well and good. But what are the “astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth” that we're supposed to be treasuring up and pondering?

There's a lot we can say here. But let's focus on just a few implications of one unique piece of information that the shepherds would have delivered to Mary from the angels.

The angels said to the shepherds in verses 10 and 11: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Some of this information was familiar to Mary.

But one phrase is particularly striking. The angels referred to Jesus as “A Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Now, we're used to that phrase. And so we can miss how shocking it would have been to a first-century Jew when it was applied to a human being by an angel.

In fact, it was so strange, that some scholars have argued it must be a typo – a mistake that somehow got into the text. The original, the thinking goes, must have been that the angles identified Jesus as “the Lord's Christ” rather than “Christ the Lord.” And yet the textual evidence is pretty clear that it should be “Christ the Lord.” [Marshall, 110] But why is that so astounding to scholars?

Well, because, as one commentator points out, there are no similar examples in first-century Judaism where this title is applied, in this way, to a human being. Because throughout the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, “the Lord” referred to Yahweh – the God of the Bible, the one true God of Israel. And the use was the same among first-century Jews: “the Lord” was God – the one true God. It was not applied by faithful Jews to any mere man. [Evans, 205-206]

But here the angels themselves use that title to refer to Jesus – to this little human baby. The little one laying before her in the manger was the Lord ... the Most High God, come in the flesh.

While Mary knew her son was going to be something astounding, I think it's possible that this was the first time that Jesus was so clearly identified to her as God in the flesh – Yahweh come in human form.<sup>1</sup>

And recognizing that Jesus was God in human form has some real implications ... implications worth treasuring up and pondering in our hearts.

For one thing, it has implications about the nature of God himself.

I shared this quote not long ago, but it's worth coming back to.

Theologian N.T. Wright explains it like this – he says: “To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus.” But, he notes, “It is also to make a stupendous claim about God.”

“When people say ‘God’ today,” he writes, “they are usually referring to a hypothetical Being who lives at some distance from the world, detached from normal life. This Being may occasionally intervene, but for the most part stays aloof, watchful, vaguely disapproving.”

But that's not what Jesus was like. “Jesus,” he writes, “was a full-blooded human being. [...] [And] the sort of company he kept made reputable people – including his own family – look down their noses with disapproval. It's ridiculous to think of Jesus as being ‘God’ in that high-and-dry sense, detached and disapproving.”

“This,” Wright continues, “is the really scary thing that [some] [...] never come to grips with; not that Jesus might be identified with a remote, lofty, imaginary being (any fool could see the flaw in that idea), but that God, the real God, the one true God, might actually look like Jesus [...] a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces. What does that do to Christian belief?”

Wright concludes:

“The Christian doctrine of the incarnation [...] is all about *a different sort of God* – A God who was so different to normal expectations that he could, completely appropriately, become human in, and as, the man Jesus of Nazareth.” Which is why to say that Jesus is God is not just to make a startling statement about Jesus. It's also to make an astounding claim about the nature and character of God. [Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 51-52]

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<sup>1</sup> Some might counter that since the angel referred to Jesus as “the Son of God” in Luke 1:35, Mary would already expect her son to be divine. But the phrase “Son of God” was used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe a human king in Israel, who was clearly not divine (e.g.: Solomon in 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13, 28:6). Even Luke uses it elsewhere to describe a special human being (Adam in Luke 3:38b). And since the angel was promising for Mary's son to sit on the throne of David, as a king (Luke 1:32), it makes sense that Mary would have *initially* heard that title as a promise that her son would be a human king over God's people, rather than hearing a promise of divinity. Later, in retrospect, Mary (like us) must have come to see the promise of Jesus's divinity in Luke 1:32-35. But in that moment, and when we encounter her in our text this morning, I suspect that Mary was not yet expecting her Son to be the incarnation of Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

That's something to hold in your view for a while this Christmas. That's something to wrestle with in your mind this week: That God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Lord of all creation, the sovereign One we worship ... is not distant and abstract ... but he is the God we see revealed in the person, and the life, in the personality, of Jesus Christ ... a person who cares about the details of people's lives, who is concerned about the concrete world we live in. And so the clearest way we can see what God is like is by looking at Jesus, the first century Jewish peasant who walked the streets, and worked, and sweat, and bled for his people. When we see that man – when we see Jesus – we see God. [John 14:9] That is an astounding truth of Christ's incarnation and birth.

But there's more, because the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ, the Lord, the Son of God, doesn't just tell us about what God is like in and of himself. It also tells us about God's attitude towards us.

Theologian Thomas Reynolds draws a sharp distinction between two ways of trying to help someone in need. One of those approaches we might call the approach of condescending pity. This is when a person sees someone in need, and wants to do something, but they also don't want to leave their position of security and strength. And so they respond with a kind of pity that, Reynolds writes, "feigns closeness" while maintaining distance, because they don't really want to step out of their position of comfort and safety. And so they feel sorry for the other person ... but then they help them in a way that mostly involves "condescending acts of care and assistance" which "only deepens" the person's sense of "social exclusion" because "it feigns emotional closeness to the other but actually refuses relational connection." [Reynolds, 114-115]

Many of us have experienced this at some time or another. We're in a difficult situation. And someone offers to help. But it seems like they do it in a way that keeps themselves at a distance from us ... they may do very kind things to help us, but it feels like they never really draw close to us as people. They treat us more like a task to be accomplished than like a person to be loved and to be in a close relationship with. And it makes us feel lonely. And sad.

But that's not the only way people can help others. And many of us have experienced the better alternative too. The better alternative is when someone draws close to us, and they want to know us, they even make themselves vulnerable to come alongside us and be with us in the midst of our struggle. They help too – they may care for us in very concrete ways – but they don't treat us in ways that make us feel like a task they're trying to complete ... they come alongside us and treat us as people that they want to know and have a relationship with. And that approach makes us feel less alone – it makes us feel more valued. It can give us joy and hope even in the midst of our struggles. This is the approach of vulnerable, loving empathy – the approach that risks hurt and risks pain and risks discomfort out of love for the other person – and a desire to draw close to them in a real relationship. [Reynolds, 117, 123-124; Arel, 199, 204; Cundill 107, 108, 112, 113]

One of the shocking revelations that comes with the incarnation of Jesus is that God – the true God, the God who made us – does not approach us with distant and condescending pity. He doesn't treat us like problems he has to manage. He doesn't keep us at arm's length. Instead, he draws close to us as people whom he loves and cares for. He stoops down to where we are, and he makes himself vulnerable in order to truly know us.

God, the all-powerful God, becomes a vulnerable baby ... someone who needs to be cared for by others ... someone vulnerable to suffering and pain ... and he does this all so he can come alongside us in love and compassion. That's the kind of love he shows us – not distant and condescending pity, but vulnerable and empathetic love – love that draws close to us and makes us less alone.

That truth is worth keeping in view ... it's worth wrestling with and pondering ... it's worth applying to your life and your struggles, because it means that even when it feels to us like God is distant, he's not – because that's not what he's like. He's a God who comes close to us in our difficulties. He knows what it's like to struggle and suffer as we do. He can sympathize with our weakness. [Hebrews 4:15] And so in our suffering, in our hurt, in our struggles, in our temptations, we can pray to him, and he knows what it's like to go through what we are going through. That's how he relates to us – with love rooted in vulnerability that he took on, and which makes him able to empathize with us. That's worth keeping in mind. That's worth pondering.

In addition, the incarnation and birth of Jesus means that we have hope. Because it means our hero has come to us. And his coming will make everything right.

It's as if a group of people in a dangerous situation suddenly learn that Clark Kent, who's right there with them, is actually Superman. Or a group of people facing a threat with Bruce Banner at their side suddenly realizes Banner can turn into the Incredible Hulk. Or hostages in a desperate situation with Donald Blake among their number learn that Blake is really Thor. In that moment of realization, everything changes. Hope bursts into life.

And in the same way, the moment that we recognize – that we see, that we wrestle with – the truth that that tiny baby who came among us in this broken, and sinful, and often dark world, where despair is so common – that moment we realize that that baby, who is among us, is actually Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the all-powerful God of heaven and earth, the Maker of all things, the champion of the powerless, the Savior of sinners – the moment we realize that the baby who has come to us is this great God ... our hope should burst into life. Because our hero is here. And he will rescue us.

Through his life on this earth, and his death on our behalf, his rising from the dead for our salvation – through these things he saved us for eternity. He has overcome sin, and death, and darkness, and hell, and one day he will wipe them all away forever, and we will live with him in a new heaven and a new earth for eternity, if we trust in him. That too is a profound truth worth keeping in view when darkness looms ... worth pondering and wrestling with when despair comes knocking.

The character of our God, the nature of his love, the power of the hope he brings us ... while Christmas can be filled with worries, work, and weariness, God calls us to treasure up and ponder these astounding truths of Christ's incarnation and birth.

## **Conclusion**

These are the sort of things we celebrate at Christmas. They are incredible. But we can so easily miss them.

Brothers and sisters, let us not be those who overlook them this year.

I don't know what it needs to look like for you, but whether it's setting aside time this week for prayer and reflection, or talking over these truths of Christmas with another Christian, or slowly reading the Bible story, or intentionally bringing your mind back to these truths over and over again this week – whatever it needs to look like for you, let us not be those who miss these profound truths of Christmas this week.

But despite whatever worries or work or weariness we may have ... let us hear again the testimony of the Christmas story in the Scriptures ... and let us treasure it up and ponder it in our hearts.

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

Arel, Stephanie N. *Affect Theory, Shame, and Christian Formation*. Springer International Publishing, 2016.

Cundill, Helena Jane. *Autism, Prayer, and Anxiety: Conversations about Autistic Experience*. PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2023.

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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.