

Sermon Archive 323

Thursday 24 December, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 2: 1-19

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Mary's got a civic census duty to fulfil - been racing from Nazareth to Bethlehem just because her wretched husband-to-be's family happened to be born in some inconvenient back-block - a good journey South of here. She's on the road to there, rather than staying at home - just when home-stay would have been good.

There have been pressing needs "on the hoof", to find somewhere to stay, somewhere to put the baby - if he comes. For God's sake, they shouldn't have to settle for a food trough - but they might have to. How angry is she with Joseph, who's not carrying a baby, and maybe could have booked ahead? But no; in those days you can't book ahead. You have to make do. But the pressure of "making do" has mounted - and now the baby comes. That'd be enough, you'd think; but now, for reasons expressed only in the mouths of angels, and conceived only in the mind of God, she's had waves of uninvited people coming through the door, shepherds (with angels attached), and maybe a little later some astrologers from the East. It's a mad and busy time.

I wonder what **you** do in busyness - under pressure changing plans and people banging on the door. Well, what **I** do, is **shut** the door. I turn off the phone and close the diary. I work to block the interruptions out, to turn away from them - so I can focus on things that have chosen. Interestingly, I do this a wee bit at Easter, and sometimes around funerals - they can be a busy time. But mostly, as I manage my time, chopping things out, I do it at **Christmas**. You know, a million Christmasy things need doing before Christmas; Christmas - the time of extra stuff and time-pressured things. At Christmas, I do a lot of curtain pulling - of turning away. No vacancy! I don't want shepherds coming to my door. As for learned astrologers - turning up just when I thought the

Christmas rush was over, requiring me to explore protocols for receiving gifts from strangers from other cultures. In typical Myers Brigg's J type personality, I don't see why this business is still going on. Didn't we finish the visitations last week?!

Back to Mary - who gives birth to the One whose faith fills us. We're told that Mary, having heard lots of words offered from shepherds and angels, having received many strange visitors while she was balancing baby on her knee in a busy time, abandoned none of these things. She didn't shut them out - but did something that Luke calls "holding them in her heart".

She takes the weird intrusions of God, with all the weird intrusions of the people attached to God, and doesn't dismiss them as too weird, too intrusive, too personally inconvenient, but gives them space in her contemplation. She **welcomes** them by treasuring them in her heart.

In the longer narrative, Joseph, Mary's husband, has a coming and going quality to him. He nurtures the child, so it seems, teaches him a trade, and is a good man. But somewhere in the story of Jesus, he just disappears. No record's kept of his dying, but it seems he did die, leaving Mary as the mother - who's with her child from the start, until the end, treasuring his birth. She is the parent who is constant, and whose constancy begins by treasuring various things, spoken for him by fools and dreamers, in her heart.

What does it mean to raise a child while treasuring words of foolishness and dreaming? And what might it mean, if you think he *is* a world-changer, to be a woman who listens, who hopes, who nurtures the mysteries around who he is becoming? Do you think he ever would have become who he became if someone raising him had not treasured words of hope and faith in her heart? The power of the parent to shape the child . . .

Mary hears shepherds saying that they have heard angels declaring glory in heaven and peace on earth. She treasures it. The critic, the time-stressed minister, the servant of the dairy says" that's second-hand reportage that

never will stand in court. He said / she said / God knows what was said. And for God's sake, what does anyone mean by angels? This is surely a distraction! We don't have time for this! Pull down the blinds and draw the curtains. Focus instead on the practical stuff that needs to be done, and block out God's intrusions into our diary!

-ooOoo-

Well, does faith reply, that a good number of people, two thousand years later, are going to gather to remember the birth that occurred back then - nurtured by a woman with a treasuring heart? That good number of people are going to remember that that wee child changed forever the way we thought about God and people, and God's home and our home, and where God is, and what face we see when someone speaks to us the word, "God". What is this great, lofty matter of God? Who are we? O God, when I think about the stars, what are human beings, O God, that you care for them? That you care for us.? This all was treasured in Mary's heart.

Having embraced what is happening to her (we don't really know what's happening to her), having met the people who think they've seen angels, having been vulnerable but not frightened away, having experienced all this in a time when a possibly unwelcome queue is forming outside her door, she gathers it all in, holds it as one, and ponders it in her heart.

O, people of Christchurch! On a Christmas Eve, what in Mary's name dare I say to you? You all have things to do. Some of you have very many things to do. Some have deep convictions that angels never interfere in human life - but still find yourself holding odd intuitions and wonderings. Some think that God, whatever you mean by "God" could never really fit into your model of the world. (Go away! Drop the blinds! Pull the drapes! Block the mystery!)

As the Christ is born, and the world changes forever, even though the world doesn't notice at the time, Mary notices the signs, and she treasures them

in her heart, where over some years they find nurture (in that mother's heart), and end up setting free in our world the "God with us" person of Jesus. Are we looking for people who have time and peace to hold things, and ponder things, in our hearts? Are we looking for people who are willing to appreciate the songs of angels?

I don't know. But Mary, very busy in her context, hears some whisperings from God, and some bold expressions by those invaded by God - not good timing! - but keeps them in her heart.

To ponder. To consider. To love. To nurture - until the Christ comes forth. Could it be that an important part of Christ being born among us is our willingness to keep certain things in our hearts?

I often say, at the end of sermons and reflections, "we keep a moment of quiet". In this moment of quiet, dare we treasure some nativity things in our hearts, and offer ourselves for the nurturing of God?

Ah well; we will see.