

PONDERING IN OUR HEARTS
A Christmas Eve Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
December 24, 2006

It's wonderful to see all of you here on this Christmas Eve: finally away from the ordeals of shopping and preparations and busyness of this season -- just to sit quietly in this beautiful church and hear the ancient story of a baby's birth. For an hour or so all of us have set everything else aside: to listen to wonderful music, sing together, pray together, join in holy communion, and light candles in the darkness. Can we call all of this pondering in our hearts?

As you heard in the gospel story from Luke,ⁱ Mary the mother of Jesus goes through a true ordeal. Because of the Roman emperor's decree on census registration, she's forced to travel overland, when nine months pregnant, from her home up north in the Galilee region of Israel to Bethlehem, which is south of Jerusalem in Judea. The distance is about ninety miles, some of it over mountainous trails, and it would have taken more than a week.ⁱⁱ Then Mary gives birth to her first child on the road or in a barn, and the best she can do for the baby is to bed it down in an animal-feeding trough. Soon, she's surrounded by a bunch of shepherds, who were in a socially despised occupation at the time, considered shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on other peoples' land.ⁱⁱⁱ They tell her about their terrifying experience of God's light shining all around them in the fields one night, and an angel, accompanied by a multitude of heavenly beings, sending them off to see her particular baby. So what does Mary do? She ponders in her heart.

I know what it means to "ponder." It means to think about something carefully in your head -- to weigh it in your mind. It implies a serious process of mental activity -- a careful consideration of all the factors involved.^{iv} But what does it mean to ponder something in your

heart? The original Greek text uses both the word that we translate into “ponder” and the word for “heart” in the same sentence. “Ponder” in the Greek suggests not just considering but also trying to put things together.^v But doing it in the “heart” gives an important emotional overlay to this process. To ponder in our heart is to try to feel it out as well as to think it out. It’s a kind of holistic contemplative response.

Mary shows up only a handful of times in the Bible,^{vi} but on several of those occasions it seems as if she’s doing this kind of contemplating. The first is at the time of the Annunciation, when the unmarried virgin ponders the greeting of an angel who tells her that she will conceive and bear a son who will be called Son of God and of whose kingdom there will be no end.^{vii} The second is at the time of Jesus’ birth, as I’ve discussed. The third is when the twelve year-old Jesus is found among the teachers in the temple in Jerusalem, where “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding.”^{viii} Can you imagine what kind of cognitive and emotional response a young woman would have to this set of occurrences, and then having to explain it and share it with a man named Joseph to whom she’s engaged at the time of Jesus’ conception and birth and who later tries to train his son to be a carpenter, not a prophet? Indeed, pondering in one’s heart seems to be a psychological and practical necessity for Mary in trying to put it all together and go on effectively with her life.

A minister friend of mine, the Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones, who graduated from Stanford in the mid-1970’s, has spoken of how all parents can find much to relate to in Mary’s story, even without visitations of angels and shepherds, a virgin birth, and having a child who will be called the Son of God: I quote Nancy: [There’s a] mixture of joy and fear when you know you are to bring new life into this old world: the rush of hope and the sense vast potential, for truly every child *does* change the world in small or large ways; but also the fear that comes with the sure

knowledge that our children will be hurt and will have their hearts broken, for this is the cost of living, and the certainty that they will hurt us, too, intentionally or not, and that their lives will pierce our souls. Fear because we must face this hurt, must open ourselves to it, fear because we can't predict when or how these hurts will come to us and our children. All we can do is to make ourselves available, and make space for the shaft of light, for us and for them."^{ix} To do this well, though, we must make space for pondering in our hearts. We must not be so busy, or self-absorbed, or materially-committed, or emotionally deadened, or insensitive to the larger world around us that we don't ponder in our hearts the extraordinary gift of life that we've been given and how to live it fully with meaning and purpose.

This is true for those of you who are children and young adults now too, of the age of Mary – probably high school or college age at the most. This is a busy era of cell phones and text messaging, of face book internet connection, of doing school and sports and extracurricular activities that leave little time for contemplation and self-reflection. Where and when can one ponder in one's heart anymore as a student, or as a recent grad working 60-80 hours a week and then playing hard during the few waking hours left? Maybe one can ponder in one's heart out walking or running alone, unless one's only hearing the I-pod in one's ears. Maybe one can ponder in one's heart during a long shower or when writing in one's journal. Maybe one can ponder in one's heart by taking formal time for meditation or prayer – even only 20 minutes a day – early in the morning or late at night.

But then aren't we doing it here and now too? I think that's what churches and synagogues and mosques and temples and shrines at their best are for: a place where we can come regularly, say once a week, to ponder in our hearts. Hopefully there's great architecture and art within its walls, like here in Memorial Church, music or chant that touches our hearts and

souls, quiet contemplative time, rituals that feel transformative, and spoken words that help us think and feel on another level than that of everyday life. I don't want to sound self-serving about spoken words, though -- especially preached words. I think sermons are as good a time as any to ponder in one's heart -- with the words just flowing over you, not being listened to carefully as in a lecture or speech. I've found throughout my life that I drift in and out of sermons (hopefully, not when I'm preaching them, though). An image or story or idea preached will become a launching pad for my own personal thoughts and feelings as I sit in the pew, and I may or may not catch back up with the preacher later in the sermon. Hopefully that's what's happening for a number of you now! But where else can we come and not be tested on the spoken words we hear, not have careful listening affect our job performance, and not merely be entertained or informed? These kinds of religious institutions at their best should deeply refresh and inspire and challenge and renew us by helping us ponder in our hearts.

Tonight of all times may we ponder in our hearts glad tidings of great joy, light that transforms the darkness, and a new beginning that can bring us and the world at large the hope of peace everlasting. Let me close now with the words of another minister who graduated from Stanford, the Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern:

I couldn't hear myself think above the din of my surroundings,
And when I finally did, I was surprised by what I heard.
I'd lived my life in restless banter, but with a pause I met what had eluded me –
The part of me (and Her) that waited to be born.
In a flash, the voices of my friends, abandoned,
AND my children AND my spouse, could once again be heard.
And I knew then the price of racing, harried, through my life:
Child, friend, lover, parent, Destiny, God made mute by my deaf ears.
No better argument for staying still was ever made to me,
Nor happiness, in my entire life, more easily found and held
Than learning to be watchful – listening, waiting, looking—
For what watches, waits, and listens to be born.^x

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 2: 1-20.

ⁱⁱ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 124; Paul Wong, “Spring Birth” at http://www.geocities.com/glory_ark/springbirth.html

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 65.

^{iv} *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Meriam-Webster, Inc., 1997), Tenth Edition, p. 905.

^v “Luke 2:19,” <http://net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Luk&chapter=2&verse=19>

^{vi} Peter Calvocoressi, *Who’s Who in the Bible* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 118-120.

^{vii} Luke 1: 26-38.

^{viii} Luke 2: 41-52.

^{ix} Nancy Palmer Jones, “What Are We Waiting For?” (a sermon delivered at the South Nassau, New York, Unitarian Universalist Congregation on December 12, 2004).

^x Vanessa Rush Southern, “Advent” in *This Piece of Eden* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001).