

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 17, 2014**

PONDER THESE THINGS

Luke 2:15-20

I know it is out of the ordinary to focus on the Christmas story in August. It probably seems odd to you. You may think I've fallen off my rocker one too many times. I will leave it to you to reach your own conclusion about that. Nevertheless, I want to read a portion of the Christmas story in Luke 2 this morning. Let me explain why I think it is not so strange, why it should not seem so strange for us to read and reflect on the birth of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it amid the heat and humidity of August.

Do you remember in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, how, when the white witch ruled over Narnia, it was "always winter, but never Christmas"? But when Aslan the lion, the Christ-figure in the Narnia stories, appeared in Narnia, what happened? The snow began to melt, the ice began to thaw, Christmas came at last, and spring finally returned to Narnia. Since Jesus entered into our world as a newborn baby, it need no longer be "always winter, but never Christmas" in our hearts. In fact, because Jesus came, because He took on our flesh and blood and came to live among us, because He demonstrated the height and depth and width and length of His love for us – *God's* love for us – by taking our sins upon Himself and giving His life for us on the cross in payment for all our sins, it can be Christmas in our hearts all year round. Even in August. In fact, right about now, in what we think of as "the dog days of summer," it may be that some of us urgently need to be reminded of the good news of the message of Christmas in the Bible.

I pray that each of you may have at least a taste of Christmas in your heart today, that each of you may find rest and refreshment for your soul as we pause to ponder who God is and what He has done for us. Let's look together at the portion of the Christmas story found in Luke 2:15-20. Let's give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Last Sunday we talked about the longing of our souls, in the words of a character from the *Seinfeld* TV show, for "serenity now!" We focused our attention on the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-29, where the Savior extends this invitation to anyone and everyone who will accept it: "Come to me," says Jesus, "all you who are weary and burdened with the cares and demands of life, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." *Rest for your soul. Serenity now.* It is available to anyone who needs it. And it is a gift of grace. It is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Which describes every last one of us. It is not something you have to earn. You can't earn grace. If you could, it would no longer be grace. It is free of charge. But you won't find true rest for your soul, you won't experience real serenity now or ever, unless you *come to Jesus* in true humility and faith. *Come to Him* just as you are, and lovingly, trustingly submit to His Lordship by taking His

“yoke” upon you, so that you can learn from Him “the unforced rhythms of grace” (11:29, *The Message*).

Come to Jesus, dear friends. *Keep on coming to Jesus* again and again and again. Allow Him to minister to your soul as only He can. Cultivate a deeper, purer love for God and a stronger, surer faith in Him, a faith that will enable you to weather whatever storms that may pass through your life. If you want the rest Jesus offers and that only He can give, you must come to Him. There is no other way. You must keep on coming to Him day by day by day. In the same way that branches must remain connected to the vine from which they receive nourishment (John 15:1-11), you and I must remain connected to Jesus. We must not allow our connection to Jesus to be weakened or severed. If, somehow, it becomes severed, we must come back to Jesus and re-establish our connection through humble, heartfelt repentance and sincere trust in Him.

Sounds good, doesn't it? *Come to Jesus*, and He will give you rest. *He will*. But, someone may ask: What exactly am I to do when I get off the treadmill of hurriedness and put aside all the demands and duties of my life in order to come to Jesus and find rest for my soul? Good question.

This is where I think we can learn something from the experience and example of Mary. The thing about Mary, of course, is that Christians tend to cluster at one end of the spectrum or the other. Either we exalt Mary so highly that Jesus is relegated to second place, at best. Or we pay too little attention to Mary and fail to give her the respect and honor she deserves. It is a mistake to treat Mary as though she were the fourth person of the Trinity. It is also a mistake to make too little of her role in the outworking of God's plan of salvation. So, let's be careful not to neglect what we can learn from Mary.

I'm struck by what Luke tells us about her at the end of his Christmas narrative, in 2:19. He says that “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” You know the story. You know that the shepherds – who were the first to learn the news of the promised Messiah, who heard the anthem of the angelic choir singing the praises of God, and who then ran into Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger – you know the shepherds excitedly told everyone they saw what the angel had said about the child. Not surprisingly, those who heard the news got excited, too. At least momentarily. Then the shepherds went back to their sheep. As they went, they were singing songs of joy, giving glory and praise to God for what He had made known to them.

Mary, however, quietly meditated on all that had happened. She was probably too exhausted from giving birth to break out in song. Still, Mary engaged her mind and heart to think back, to recall what God had said He would do in her, through her, and how God had been faithful to His promises.

She must have recalled the day, for example, when, out of the blue, as it must have seemed to her, she received a visit from the angel Gabriel, who had a message for her from God (Luke 1:26-38). If she had an iPhone, you would think she would have checked it first thing in the morning to see if she had any appointments or plans for the day. But she would have found

nothing there about a meeting with an angel. Gabriel's sudden appearance and greeting had just surprised the socks off her. After all, it wasn't every day that you found yourself face-to-face with an actual angel sent from God. I think Mary must have remembered that encounter with Gabriel and the astonishing message she had received from him. Looking back on all that had transpired, she must have treasured it – all of it – in her heart, and pondered what God had done to bring it to fulfillment.

It is clear that Mary did not have an inflated ego. She was not full of herself. She did not think there was anything out-of-the-ordinary about herself. She may not have used these words, but I think she must have thought to herself: “How odd of God to choose somebody like me. How odd of God to choose a nobody like me to give birth to the very Son of God. It is not what I would have expected. But I am the Lord's servant. And I desire to do His will.” She saw herself as insignificant, but it did not matter, because “the Mighty One” (Luke 1:49) was at work in her. Mary's resume, humanly speaking, was thin. Her credentials, from the point of view of the way the world usually operates, were non-existent. But God, in His sovereign wisdom and love, had chosen *her*. She must have treasured this amazing truth, and pondered it in her heart. As she reflected on these things, she must have come to a new, heightened awareness of how God's ways are different from ours (Isaiah 55:8). After all, who but God could have thought this all up? Even more, who but God could have made it all happen?

I think Mary must also have remembered the eagerness she felt in her spirit to go and visit her relative Elizabeth. She must have treasured the exuberant and faith-filled greeting she received from Elizabeth when she arrived at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. She must have marveled at the reaction of the baby in Elizabeth's womb to the sound of her (Mary's) voice. The baby, who would be named John and be known as John the Baptist (or Baptizer), “leaped for joy” upon hearing her voice (Luke 1:39-45).

I think Mary must also have remembered the song of praise she sang to the Lord in Luke 1:46-55, a song known as the *Magnificat*, the first word in the Latin translation of it. The song was her outburst of praise and thanksgiving to God for His grace in her life and for the attributes of God's character – specifically His great power, holiness, and mercy. She gave thanks and praise to God as well for what He had done for her and what He had done for His covenant people, and for what He would do for them through the soon-to-be-born Savior. In the quietness of her heart, after the angels had gone back into heaven and the shepherds had gone back to their sheep, I think Mary must have recalled the song she herself had sung and rejoiced in the unexpected ways God was at work to bless His people.

Then, of course, there was the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of 70 or 80 miles. Not an easy undertaking for a woman in the final stages of pregnancy. Mary was not required to go with Joseph to Bethlehem for the census. She could have stayed behind in Nazareth. Joseph probably took Mary with him for at least one, possibly both, of the following reasons: 1) because Mary, more than likely, was the object of widespread gossip, even condemnation, in Nazareth, having gotten pregnant before consummating her marriage to Joseph; and 2) because Joseph was afraid the baby would be born before he got back home from Bethlehem, and he didn't want Mary to give birth without him being present.

Whatever the reason(s), Mary went with Joseph to Bethlehem, where, according to the prophecy given in Micah 5:2, the promised Messiah was to be born. Only God could use the decree of a pagan emperor in faraway Rome and the distress caused by unkind, gossiping tongues in Nazareth to bring Mary to Bethlehem in order to fulfill the prophetic promise regarding the birthplace of the Savior. That is something to treasure and ponder in your heart.

The point of all this is to say that, when you come to Jesus to find rest and refreshment for your soul, you can learn from Mary. You can “treasure up” all the things God has taught you in His Word and all the ways you have experienced His tender mercies, lavish love, and sovereign grace, and, like Mary, you can ponder them in your heart. Meditate on the transforming truths and power of God’s Word. Think about the character of God as He has made Himself known in Scripture, in creation and history. Let His Word go down deep into your heart and affect every area of your life.

Treasure up the truths David declared in Psalm 139, which, as a devout Jewish girl, Mary must have known:

O LORD, You have searched me and You know me.

(Stop and think about that.)

You know when I sit and when I rise;

You perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down;

You are familiar with all my ways.

(Nothing escapes His attention. Absolutely nothing. As it says in Hebrews 4:13: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered” – it is out in the open – “and laid bare before His eyes.”)

*Before a word is on my tongue,
You know it completely, O LORD.*

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Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Where can I flee from Your presence?

(Answer: Nowhere.)

If I go up to the heavens, You are there.

If I make my bed in the depths, You are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there Your hand will guide me,

Your right hand will hold me fast.

*If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”*

even the darkness will not be dark to You;

the night will shine like the day,

*for darkness is as light to You.
For You created my inmost being;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.*

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*All the days ordained for me
were written in Your book
before one of them came to be.
(Psalm 139:1-4, 7-13, 16)*

Ponder these things, dear friends. God knows everything there is to know about you, including the things you don't want anyone else to know. God knows it all. He knows *you*, just as He knew all the good and all the bad about David, just as He knew the heart of Mary. You can run from God, but you cannot hide. There is no place you and I can go to escape from God. God knows you as no one else knows you, and yet He loves you. As you come to Jesus for rest and refreshment, treasure this. Think about it. Let this truth penetrate deep into your heart and mind both to convict you (if conviction of sin is what you need) and to comfort you.

Ponder the truth that God also has a plan for your life, just as He had a plan for Mary. It is not the same plan that He had for Mary, of course. Hers was a one-of-a-kind mission. Nevertheless, God has put you in this world at this time and place in history for a purpose. God has a mission for you. Have you ever thought about that? Do you know what your mission from God is? If you don't, ask God to show you His purpose for your life. Read and meditate on His Word. As you do, ask God to make your mission clear. It may be something small in the eyes of the world. Or it may be something huge, something way bigger than anything you could ever have imagined. Like Mary, you may not understand (at least at first) how God could ever do what He wants to do with your life. In the end, though, what can you say except what Mary said to Gabriel in Luke 1:38 when he laid out God's plan to her: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

As you come to Jesus, as you treasure up the truths and promises of His Word, as you trace the hand of His grace in your life, as you diligently seek His guidance and ask Him to reveal His purpose for your life, will you respond in trusting faith and loving surrender as Mary did? Can you say – will you say: "I am your servant, Lord. I'm ready to serve. May it be to me as You desire. For your glory and praise, not mine":

Come to Jesus, dear friends. No matter what you may be dealing with in your life, come to Jesus. Bring your burdens and cares to Him. Take time to be quiet in His presence. Think back on the ways you have seen God at work in your life and in the lives of others around you. Ponder these things and all the treasure of grace that are yours in the Lord Jesus Christ. In doing so, you will find rest and refreshment for your soul.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.