



from the desk of . . .

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Advent

KEEPING CHRISTMAS WELL

Luke 2:19 & 51

This week I was thanking one of folks who placed an ad in our Dinner Theatre program, & he asked if we were planning to do another one next year. (Kathy, please plug your ears.) I said ... "Yes, our 9th Dinner Theatre will be held on Saturday, 2 December 2017.

He then asked if I knew what the play would be. Actually there's already been some discussion about that. As a # of us were working in the kitchen getting things ready for this year's dinner, it was suggested that we do "A Christmas Carol" again, which we did back in 2010.

So, the other morning, I picked up my copy of it (X) & skimmed through it. And as I read the preface, I was struck with what Charles Dickens had written ...

"I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book,
to raise the Ghost of an Idea,
which shall not put my readers out of humor with
themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me.
May it haunt their houses pleasantly."

And it certainly has. It has haunted our houses, our bookshelves, our stages, & our screens, (& next year, our Dinner Theatre), quite pleasantly for almost 2 centuries.

Over the years I've noticed something unique about "A Christmas Carol." Whenever I read it, or see it played out, even though I know the story quite well,

I always seem to hear something else in it ... something that touches my heart in a new & fresh way.

So, as I was thinking about that this week, my mind went back to the ending of Dickens' story.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with it, but at the very end, after his hauntings, & his resolution to start a new life, the narrator shares this about the change that Ebenezer Scrooge experienced ... (X)

"Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all & infinitely more; & to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a 2nd father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, & as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. ... And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well."

Does that line strike you as it does me? ...

"He knew how to keep Christmas well."

Could that be said of me? Could that be said of you?

Do we "keep Christmas well"? ...

My gut feeling is that many of us do not. And maybe it's because we simply don't know how. So, instead of "keeping Christmas well" ... we just celebrate it.

We decorate. We cook. We wrap. We get together. We unwrap. We eat. We undecorate.

And then Christmas is done until next year.

We celebrate Christmas, & yet ... we don't hold on to it. We don't allow Christmas to indwell us. We don't let it transform us. We don't keep Christmas well. We don't "treasure" it as Mary did that 1st Christmas night.

So, I want us to focus in on Mary this morning. And I'm going to pull out a couple of statements that Luke wrote about her, that actually took place a # of years apart. The 1st comes the night of Jesus' birth ...
the 2nd, 12 years later.

Listen now to Good News from Luke, to you who have gathered here for worship at Community Church.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them. ... Mary treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:19 & 51)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

From Luke's account, it seems clear to me, that Mary, & maybe Mary alone, knew how to keep Christmas well. In fact, Luke writes about her in much the same manner that Dickens describes Scrooge after his late-night transformation.

"Mary remember all these things
& thought deeply about them."

That's a clear link between the Scriptures & the line that Dickens wrote at the end of his story.

We're also told that ...

"Mary treasured all these things in her heart."
I love that thought.

Now one of the things I often do in my sermon preparation is compare Bible translations. The guys do this in our Monday evening support group.

It helps us get a broad understanding of the passage.

Well, the old King James Version, which is the one that would have been available to Charles Dickens, puts it this way ... "Mary kept all these sayings in her heart."

You know, I really like the Good News translation here. "Mary treasured all these things in her heart."

When I treasure something ... I do a lot more than just keep it. The things I treasure have infinity more value to me than the things I just keep around.

Things I treasure have limitless value to me. For example, on my left hand I'm wearing a ring. It's my wedding ring ... & it's one of the things I treasure. And I treasure it ... not because I bought it for myself. It's a ring that was given to me when my wife & I were married. This ring was given to me by Kathy.

It's a reminder of our bonding together. And it's a keepsake of all that we've shared together over the years since our wedding day.

I don't treasure the gold of the ring, but the story that encompasses it. I treasure it because it's a symbol of a shared life together ... of 5,280 memories!

If you come into my office you see walls filled with pictures & plaques & crosses. Most of which were given to me over the years by people with whom I've had a special bond. It's not the gift or the note or the plaque that are treasures ... it's the story that goes with it.

It's the memory that turns those things into treasures.

I have a handwritten note that my Dad gave me. It's not the note paper that I treasure, but the story in & behind it. The Christmas tree out in our coffee/chai area has some of my Mom's decorations on it. There's a story behind those decorations,

which is why I especially treasure them.

You all get the idea of what I'm talking about.

And I'm sure that each of you has treasures in your life ... items that go way beyond the physical thing ... but involve a story; & when you think on them, when you ponder them, it opens up a whole realm of appreciation.

And it was the same for Mary that 1st Christmas night. Miraculously, God placed Himself within Mary's womb. (Matthew 1:23) Wow! Try to imagine that!

And then, 9 months later, Mary gave birth to a Son.

And when she looked into the face of her little boy ... she was actually looking into the **face of God!**

That thought just about takes my breath away.

There's that great line in Mark Lowry's song ...

"Mary Did You Know?"

"Mary, did you know that when you kiss your little baby you've kissed the face of God." ...

Mary, of all people, had much to **remember**, & **think deeply about**, & **treasure** in her heart when it comes to Christmas. So, just what were some of those things?

Let's begin with a visit from an angel ... most likely Gabriel. Once again, let's try to fill in the missing pieces. Here's Mary, a very young lady, 12 or 13, most likely, & she's anticipating getting married.

We had a wedding here in the sanctuary yesterday morning.

Kate & Brad had been planning their marriage for months & months. We did the pre-marital counseling last Spring. They had been excitedly anticipating it.

Mary has been focusing on getting married; on setting up housekeeping with Joseph.

And all of a sudden an angel appears to her.

"Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant & give birth to a son, & you will name him Jesus. He will be great & will be called the Son of the Most High God." (Luke 1:30-32)

Well, Mary, almost immediately, went to visit her relative, Elizabeth. (Luke 1:36) Mary had just had the most earth-shaking experience in the world. And she wants to tell someone. She could hardly wait to share what had happened to her.

We can almost imagine Elizabeth's response.

"Tell me all about it. What did Gabriel say?
What did you say?"

Mary wanted to talk to Elizabeth because Gabriel had also visited her family,

& she herself was bearing a miraculous child. (Luke 1:13)

So Elizabeth wasn't the least bit skeptical & could to affirm Mary's experience. In fact,

"when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting ... the baby within her jumped with gladness." (Luke 1:41,44)

Mary, now 3 months pregnant, returns to Bethlehem, & attempts to explain all that has happened to Joseph, who certainly wouldn't have been as quick to accept & believe as Elizabeth was.

But then, after Gabriel visits him, (Matthew 1:20), Joseph is ready to proceed unquestionably.

And all the while, Mary is trying to process everything. (You women understand this kind of mindset, right?) ... Does Mary know about the Messianic prophecies that stated that Bethlehem would be the place where the Messiah would be born? (Micah 5:2) Does she & Joseph understand that when they head out for Bethlehem to register for the Roman census? (Luke 2:4)

It seems to me, very probable, that they did. Now again, I understand from a man's point of view, how exciting it is to anticipate the birth of a child ...

but Mary must have been just over the top.

So, "she gave birth to her 1st son, wrapped him in cloths & laid him in a manger." (Luke 2:7) (X)

Now up to this point, as far as we know, only she, Joseph, & Elizabeth know about the arrival of the Messiah. And now Jesus has been born. Can't you just picture Mary ... counting His toes, touching His fingers, looking at the shape of His nose & mouth & ears ...

storing up precious memory treasures.

And just then, some unexpected guests arrive. (X)
 And they're just the beginning of a series of confirmations that God provides to Mary & Joseph.

"When the shepherds saw them, they told them what the angel had said about the child." (Luke 2:17)

And Luke shares with us that when the shepherds finished their story ... Mary treasured it. It's a story that God wants you & me, & the whole world to hear.

"I am here with good news for you,
 which will bring great joy to all the people." (Luke 2:10)

We, who are gathered here this morning, **are part** of "all the people" in the angel's story.

We're part of that Heavenly proclamation ...

"I am here with good news,
 which will bring great joy to all you people at C.C.R.M."

So, we receive the Good News, we receive the gift of the Christ child ... just like Mary & Joseph did; just like the shepherds did. We take it to heart.

We treasure it.

"This very day in David's town your Savior was born -
 Christ the Lord!" (Luke 2:11)

Born to you & born to me.

There's a wonderful tradition concerning this passage that's been passed down by followers of Jesus from about the 2nd century.

They would personalize the Christmas story & place their name where the Scriptures use the plural "you".

Personalizing the shepherd's acclamation helped them to ponder as Mary did. It helped them to treasure its' meaning for their own life.

"Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you (Rande). This very day in David's town your Savior was born - Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you, (Rande): you will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger."

That makes this proclamation personal ... which it is. It's a declaration for the ages. It's a pronouncement that should be treasured by all of us who call ourselves followers of the Christ.

So, ponder for a moment with me this morning as I read to you the words of the shepherd's story once more. Only this time, think your name into the story. The angel said ...

"Don't be afraid (*name*)! I am here with good news for you (*name*), which will bring you great joy."

Imagine for a moment that the joy that the angel was proclaiming ... the joy that came with the birth of this child in the manger ... is specifically meant for you!
"I am here with good news for you."

"This very day in David's town your Savior was born - Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you, (name): you will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger."

This is how we need to **read & understand** Scripture. This is not a history book. It's a book of theology. It's God speaking to us ... today. That's why we need to read it ... & we need to think deeply about the words. We need to ponder them. We need to personalize them.

They tell about a baby who changed the world.
They tell about a baby who's changed our lives.

Almost 150 years ago, there was a frontier settlement in CA. Rugged prospectors & miners lived there. The camp was known for its' drunkenness & profanity. It was a haven for gamblers & outlaws.

Even the name of the settlement was a reflection of their lifestyle. It was called ... Roaring Camp. (X)

Into Roaring Camp came a wild woman named Cherokee Sal. And it should come as no surprise, but it wasn't long before she found herself pregnant. Sadly, when it came time for her child to be born ...

Sal died during the birth.

What should be done for the little baby was a matter of great concern to the men.

Some suggested that he should be sent to Red Dog, a camp about 40 miles away, where a woman could be found to care for him.

But the men didn't think much of the citizens of Red Dog. In fact, that feeling was mutual among all the camps. So, it was decided that they would keep the baby & do their best to care for him.

One of the men, Stumpy, was given the responsibility of being the nursemaid. Could the little fellow live? That was the big question that concerned everyone. The answer was doubtful. What did they know about a baby? What about the kinds of things a baby needs?

They were just a bunch of rough miners & worse.

The only other thing in Roaring Camp that was female was a donkey. There was some concern, but through some experimenting, which apparently was successful, milk became available. And the baby lived.

Immediately, there began to be a difference in Roaring Camp. Instinctively, the rough, uninhibited citizens showed respect for life, something they had never done in the past.

The men began taking off their hats when they entered building. Likewise, the presence of the baby created a tenderness of heart among the miners where such feelings had been entirely absent before.

Kentuck, one of the hardest drinkers in the camp, went along with the rest of the men to see the baby. The child caught hold of Kentuck's finger, & held it for a moment. Kentuck was embarrassed ...

but from that day on, he went around whistling.

Of course, there were gifts for the new little stranger, who was wrapped in red flannel & placed in a candle box on the crude table of one of the log cabins.

Beside the box & baby, Stumpy placed a hat, & indicated its' use with the words ...

"Them as wishes to contribute anything toward the orphan will find a hat handy."

And the men did give! The best that they had: a silver tobacco box ... a doubloon ... a navy revolver, mounted ... some gold ... a very beautiful lady's handkerchief ... a diamond breast pin ... a diamond ring ... a sling shot ... a Bible ... a golden spur ... a silver teaspoon ... a pair of surgeon's shears & knife ... a Bank of England note for 5 lbs. ...

&, about \$200 in loose gold & silver coins.

Of course, the men gave their gifts to the baby, & not to each other. After all, it was his birthday, & not theirs. The baby created within them a desire & delight to contribute something ... much as the Magi brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, & myrrh.

And there were other changes that began to take place with the men. This new arrival created an inner desire for quietness, calmness, decency, & a need for law & order.

The little fellow was not to be disturbed by noise.

The shouting & yelling, which had gained the settlement its' name ... Roaring Camp ... was not permitted within hearing distance of Stumpy's cabin.

The men conversed in whispers when they were nearby. Profanity was given up. And music appeared. An English sailor stopped by every night to sing a lullaby to the baby, a song of 90 stanzas!

The little stranger brought the 1st stirring of conscience to the men of Roaring Camp ...
& then an awareness of sin.

Changes began to happen fast. A female nurse was sent for. Instinctively, the men had a large & growing concern for the welfare of the child. He needed to be baptized, & so, along came a Parson.

They named him ... Tommy Luck.

Tommy's cabin was the 1st to show signs of improvement. It was kept perfectly clean & whitewashed. Then it was boarded & papered. A rosewood cradle was brought by mule from 80 miles away.

Of course, the men had to change their appearance, as well as their old habits.

And likewise, the condition of their camp.

Tuttle's Grocery imported carpet & mirrors. This tended to produce stricter habits of personal cleanliness, & an attitude of respect.

Stumpy imposed a kind of quarantine upon those who wanted the honor & privilege of holding Tommy. Even Kentuck appeared in the afternoon, wearing a clean shirt, & with his face shaved!

Nor were moral, social, & sanitary laws neglected.

Wonderful stories were told about Roaring Camp, the town that had vines & flowers around their houses, & the men wash themselves twice a day.

All that change because of a baby ... &, so too, wherever the Bethlehem story is told, life is different because of that Baby. Now not everyone recognizes the manger Child as the Man who died for the sins of the world. (John 3:16) They may not know Him as their personal Savior ... but, nevertheless, life is different because of Him, for everyone the world over.

And Mary had a front row seat. She, more than anyone else, watched it all unfold ...
right before her very eyes.

And years later, she could tell Luke all that had happened ... because she "remembered all these things & thought deeply about them."

And "she treasured all of it in her heart."

That, my friends, is how we keep Christmas well.

Yes, Mary has much to teach us ...

& she teaches us by example.

So, what have you been doing this Advent season? Are you spending any time "remembering" all that took place that 1st Christmas? Are you spending any time "thinking deeply" about it?

Are you "treasuring" the story?

My prayer for myself, & for each of you, is that we will do more than just celebrate Christmas this year.

Almighty God has sent Good News to us. He has sent His only Son (John 3:16) to be our Savior ... our Messiah ... our Lord.

Please, whatever else you do this Christmas ... ponder deeply that thought. Treasure deeply that gift.

It has eternal ramifications.

And may the world say of you & say of me ...

"They knew how to **keep Christmas well.**"

MARANA THA