

# *Letting God's Word Have the Run of the Place*

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 3, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:1-20, NRSV)

As tradition has it, Mary is a teenager when we meet her in the Bible. We don't know anything about her past, or even her immediate family, probably because there wasn't much to tell. Even her name was ordinary. It's said that up to half of the women in Israel in those days were named Mary. She was a virgin; we know that much. She also was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a local carpenter. She lived in Nazareth, a village so unimpressive that when people found out it was Jesus' hometown they said, “What? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”<sup>1</sup> Every last sign indicated that Mary would live out her very unspectacular life in virtual anonymity and be forgotten in the pages of history nearly as soon as her life was over.

Do you see how utterly astonishing it is that this young girl would be visited one day by a messenger from God with news that she is highly favored in heaven, that the Lord himself is with her? Furthermore, though still a virgin she was about to conceive in her womb a son whose name would be Jesus – literally, ‘God saves’. Her child was to be the Son of the Most High God, the long-promised ancestor of David, the Messiah, the one who was to come as eternal King.

Mary would never have believed it if not for the child which did begin to grow in her still virgin womb, if not for the dream her fiancé Joseph had confirming the promise, if not for the words of her cousin Elizabeth who was visited by another angel with news of another surprise pregnancy, if not for the testimony of some lowly shepherds who came and found Mary and her newborn son the very night he was born. The shepherds claimed some angels brought them the news out in the fields, declared to them that the Messiah, the Son of David, had just been born in Bethlehem and was lying in a feeding trough. Who could even make up something like this?

That night in Bethlehem beside the manger everybody who heard these things was filled with amazement. But remember that amazement, in and of itself, isn't necessarily faith. You can be amazed and still not believe. You can be amazed and still walk away unchanged. Mary, however, was more than amazed.

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<sup>1</sup> See John 1:46

We're told, "**But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.**"<sup>2</sup> (vs. 19)

How could Mary have even begun to understand this message she had received from God? There was no way. It was beyond understanding. And yet, she treasured God's words anyway, held them dear and deep within her heart, turned them over and over again in her mind like a skilled jeweler turns a precious gem over and over in his hands, exploring and examining every contour and edge. One commentator writes, "Mary held all that was happening in a precious bundle. Over and over again, she unpacked it and spread it out on the table of her heart."<sup>3</sup>

The word 'pondered' here is a word that, in the original Greek, literally means 'to throw together'. When you ponder something in this way you throw it in your mind, let it roll around in your heart, chew on it in the deepest part of yourself. When we do this with God's Word to us we are getting at what Paul talked about when he urges us, "**Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.**"<sup>4</sup> Let God's Word come in to you and then let it have the run of the place, giving it plenty of room in your life.<sup>5</sup>

So let me ask you, what has the run of the place in your heart? What have you thrown into your mind, made space for in your thoughts? Whose words do you treasure, turning over and over in your heart until you've examined them from every possible angle? In those quieter moments during the week, as you drive alone in the car or as you lay in bed at night, what voices capture your attention? And when they do, what messages are they speaking to you?

Do you realize that God's Word has come to you just like it came to Mary. Every single Sunday one of us stands here and does our best to humbly, but boldly, declare to you the extraordinary claims and promises of God's Word. Every time you open the Bible and reflect on what you find there, those same claims and promises come to you from off the page. And let's be honest, some of them are as astounding as the ones Mary received.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is repeated again in Luke 2:51.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Voskamp, *Why Your Heart Really Needs the Practice of Pondering*, <http://annvoskamp.com/2014/06/why-your-heart-really-needs-the-practice-of-pondering/>

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:16, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> I'm borrowing from Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrase of Colossians 3:16, which reads, "**Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives.**"

No matter who you are or what you have done, God forgives you, not because you deserve it but because he loves you! This is also true of every person you will ever meet.

No matter what you read in the newspapers, God is in charge of this world and is moving history ever closer to the day when he will make everything right.

Unshakable joy, miraculous healing, abiding peace, these things are accessible to you today in greater abundance than you have before thought possible this side of heaven.

Today Jesus stands ready to absolutely transform your life if you will let him, lift every burden, heal every wound, break every chain, calm every fear.

This is the Word of God to you! Today! Do you treasure these claims and promises in your heart? Have you thrown them into your mind, turned them over and over and over? Have you let them have the run of the place, allowed them to drown out all other competing voices? If you have not, if you do not, the world will quickly convince you that they are not true and then fill your heart and mind with a set of contradictory messages. In some cases, it already has.

Think about all that Mary went through following that night in Bethlehem. For the next 30 years we hear almost nothing about Jesus. He's there living in Nazareth with Mary. At some point he took over the carpentry business from his father. How often Mary must have watched him doing his work – another sycamore table, another repaired wall in the neighbor's house – and wondered what it all meant? He's supposed to be the Messiah and all he has to show for his life are calloused hands, a stiff back, and a bunch of furniture!

Eventually Jesus does set down his tools and goes public, even gains a name and a following for himself. But his followers are a rag-tag band of misfits, his teachings make people wonder if he's off his rocker, and his actions eventually turn those in power squarely against him. Eventually he is arrested. Even his most faithful followers scatter. He receives a trial but it's rigged from the start. And before Mary knows it, this son of hers, the one the angels promised had come to save the world, has bled to death on a Roman cross. By sunset his corpse is shut away in a dark, cold tomb.

And I have to wonder, on that dark Friday evening was Mary still treasuring all God's words to her, pondering them in her heart, letting them have the run of the place? And what about you? When everything in life

seems to contradict everything in God's Word, do you still let God's Word have the run of the place? Or are their other voices, with other messages, that you have allowed to take center stage?

I hope you realize by now that there is an evil one in this world who is doing everything possible to lead us away from all that God has for us, to twist, and deceive, and distract in ways that make us question, or ignore, or ultimately reject the truth of God's Word to us. Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from the evil one." He wasn't joking. We face one who is more powerful than us, one in this world from whom we need deliverance, one whose voice is so loud that it can easily, if allowed to do so, drown out the voice of the One full of grace and truth.

You're not forgiven. How could you be after what you have done?

You are not loved, at least by anybody who sees you for who you really are.

Those people over there, they are the problem. If only they could think and be like you.

The world is not in good hands. History is out of control, headed nowhere fast, and your best bet is to look out for yourself, or get in there and fix it yourself.

Deep and lasting change is not possible in this life, or maybe ever.

God is not nearby - not a chance! In fact, your life is too ordinary to matter much from the perspective of heaven. Your burdens are yours to carry. Lasting healing is a pipe dream. You'll never really be free, you know.

You're afraid these days? You *should* be afraid.

What has the run of the place in your heart? What words have you thrown into your mind, made space for in your thoughts? Whose voice do you treasure, turning over and over in your heart until you've examined them from every possible angle? Some of us, I'm sure, feel like we don't even have a choice.

In the late 80's famed Hollywood director, Woody Allen, began dating the adopted daughter of his then-partner, Mia Farrow. Soon Yi was 21 years old at the time. Woody Allen was 54. They eventually married. In a 2001 Time Magazine interview, Allen was asked if he considered it a healthy, equal relationship. His answer has been quoted ever since. Allen responded, "The heart wants what it wants. There's no logic to

those things. You meet someone and you fall in love and that's that."<sup>6</sup>

*The heart wants what it wants.* Is that true? Think about it. Do you believe that's true? Is the heart really in charge of what it treasures and ponders, of which words or voices get the run of the place? Are we stuck with whatever voices have taken up residence in our minds and hearts, even voices which run contrary to what God's Word had declared, even to the extent that they determine how we live out our lives?

There is a verse in the Old Testament book of Proverbs which was pointed out to me again this week. Proverbs 4:23 warns, "**Keep your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.**" That word 'keep' can also mean 'guard'. It's a word that was used in the Old Testament to describe watchtowers set up on city walls so guards could allow anything to enter the city which would help the city prosper, but also protect the city from anything which might come to do harm.

The wisdom here, therefore, is that we must be vigilant in guarding what comes into our hearts because our very lives flow from our heart. In other words, if the wrong voices are given prominence in our hearts, treasured and pondered and given the run of the place, the results are bound to show up in our lives. Jesus himself put it this way, "**But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles [the life].**"<sup>7</sup>

The heart wants what the heart wants? No! The heart wants what the heart is *fed*!<sup>8</sup> We are not called to follow our hearts but to inform our hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 declares, "**The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?**" Don't follow your heart. You can't trust it! That's a hard truth to accept, but we must accept it. Left to its own devices, yes, the heart will want what it wants but what it wants is often not good. But the heart can be fed. If truth is fed to your heart, specifically the truth of God's Word thrown into the heart and treasured and pondered, then the heart will begin to want what God wants. *Your heart can begin to want what God wants.* It all depends on what you choose to feed it.

Did you know that if you fill your body with junk food, a steady diet of sugar, fat and salt, you will train your

<sup>6</sup> Walter Isaacson, "The Heart Wants What it Wants", *Time Magazine*, June 24, 2001. Read online at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,160439,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 15:18-19, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> The PorchLive, Jonathan Pokluda, published May 30, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsgMAQEZc4c>

body to crave sugar, fat and salt? In his book, *The End of Overeating*, former commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration, Dr. David Kessler, outlines how scientists have proven that when we put food rich in sugar, fat and salt into our mouths we stimulate neurons, those basic cells of the brain which communicate with one another to create feelings, store information and control behavior. These specific neurons are uniquely encoded to respond to characteristics of food, things like taste and texture, and so when these characteristics are pleasing the neurons teach the body to want more. Basically, what this means is that every time you eat a double-double with cheese and a side of French fries, your body is being trained to want more of what you are feeding it, so much so that eventually even the sight of those twisting palm trees outside of In-n-Out Burger will set your mouth to watering.

Kessler writes, “When it comes to food, we are, in essence, following an eating script that has been written into the circuits of our brains.”<sup>9</sup> What is remarkable, however, is that these same scientists have shown that if a person is able to ignore their highly trained appetite for junk food and instead begin feeding that appetite healthy foods, in time not only will the cravings for sugar, fat and salt subside but the brain will teach the body to begin desiring more and more of the healthy food you’ve been eating. Before you know it, your mouth is watering when you drive by the farmer’s market!

You see, your physical appetite doesn’t want what it wants; it wants what it’s fed! That doesn’t mean, of course, that it’s easy to start feeding your body what it really needs to be healthy because we live in a world where doing the opposite has been made far too easy. Same with our hearts. We live in a world that is overflowing with messages which run absolutely counter to the truth of God’s Word. If left to its own devices, the heart, which is devious above all else, will want what it wants, junk food lies instead of the nourishment of truth.

But the heart, just like the stomach, can be trained. Specifically, the more we take God’s Word, truth that comes from the one who is the Creator of all that is, and ponder it in our hearts, treasuring it even when it makes little sense to us, the more the heart will come to desire more of this truth. The heart really does want what it’s fed. It’s what Paul’s getting at when he writes in Philippians 4:8, **“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is**

**commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”**

Perhaps you, like me, already know all this from experience. There have been too many seasons in my life when I have slipped into allowing myself to feed my heart with spiritual junk food. It’s hard because it’s so prevalent and, on the surface, so appetizing. I can get immersed in social media where every other post seems to be about somebody’s vacation-of-a-lifetime, or some child who has just accomplished some amazing feat my child hasn’t come close to accomplishing, or some political rant from this side or that which has sparked words between people they would never say in person to one another. Or I live on a steady diet of news reports focused on everything that is wrong with our world and suggesting all the reasons I should be concerned, or cautious, or even afraid. Or I get the radio dial stuck on that entertaining sports talk show that drips with sarcasm and mean-spiritedness.

Now, there’s nothing inherently wrong, of course, with social media, or the news, or sports talk, just like there’s nothing inherently wrong with hamburgers and French fries. But a steady diet of either is going to have an impact. And so if those are the voices that I allow to have the run of the place in my mind and heart, it won’t be long until I start seeing the effects showing up in my life. It’s really just a matter of time until meanness, cutting sarcasm, disdain, fear, anxiety, envy, even hatred begin showing up in my attitude and my actions.

By contrast, during seasons in my life when I have instead immersed myself in God’s Word, taking the promises and claims of scripture and treasuring them and pondering them, and have done so especially as a part of a community of others doing the same thing, it’s never more than a matter of time before I begin to see the opposite impact in my life. The heart wants what it’s fed and what you feed your heart will eventually bear fruit in your life. I love how Hebrews 4:12 puts it: **“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”**<sup>10</sup>

Today is the first day of Advent, the beginning of the church year when the church has historically set aside these few weeks before Christmas as a season of expectation and preparation. The word ‘advent’ literally means ‘coming’, reminding us that this is a season for us to focus our hearts on waiting for Christ to come into our world, not as a baby in a manger (that

<sup>9</sup> David Kessler, *The End of Overeating*, (Rodale, 2009), 62.

<sup>10</sup> NIV

already happened!) but at the end of time to finally set things right once and for all. Advent, then, is a time of joyful stillness, a time of fasting and prayer, a time of waiting and watching.

Is that what the world is going to feed your heart this season? Absolutely not. Remember what I told you, that there is an evil one in this world, a deceitful loudmouth who will do whatever possible to distract us from the goodness God has in store for us. Sadly, so many people will swallow it whole as they allow this season to become marked by frantic rushing, unbridled consumerism, paralyzing stress, crushing guilt, and hollow sentimentality.

Let me invite you to feed your heart something else this season, and not just this season but beyond. Wouldn't you like to let a different voice have the run of the place for a change? Some of you, I know, are doing this already. That's wonderful. Don't let the busyness of this season get you off your spiritual diet. For the rest of you, can you let Mary be an example you, to set aside time each day to listen carefully to the claims and promises of God's Word, as extraordinary and too-good-to-be true as they may seem to be, and treasure them by pondering them in our hearts?

A lot of us here at Faith use a resource called *Seeking God's Face*, which is simply a guide meant to help us read, reflect on, and pray through God's Word every day. If you don't have another place to begin, I want to encourage you to use this as a guide this Advent. Many of you already have a copy. We have some for sale today. Or, just look at the back of the Next Step guide where you can find some simple instructions and the daily readings from this resource.

Here's what I encourage you to do. I want to ask you to make a decision right now to do this. Commit this Advent season, and hopefully beyond, to start your day off with God's Word. Let God's voice be the first voice of your day. Before you pick up the newspaper, before you log on to Facebook, before you turn on NPR or talk radio, spend time in scripture and let God speak to you first. And ideally, not just in the morning, but throughout the day, and at the end of the day. As you do, read with the expectation that the living God, present to us always by the very Spirit of Christ, will speak to you words you need to hear, feeding your heart what it needs to be fed, transforming your life to become, regardless of the circumstances around you, rooted in the joy and peace and hope of Christ which cannot be shaken.

Amen.



## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read the text from Luke 2:1-20 again. It's a familiar passage so try to read it with fresh eyes. What new thing do you notice?
2. When we are told in verse 19 (and again in 2:51) that Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart", what do you think this means?
3. Do you think Mary continued to do this all along the way, even at those times when the promises of God must have seemed, to her, far-fetched or forgotten?
4. Woody Allen claimed, "The heart wants what it wants." Do you agree? Should we always follow what our hearts are telling us?
5. Proverbs 4:23 reads, "**Keep your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.**" What do you think it means that the 'springs of life' flow from the heart? How can you see this evidenced in your life?
6. What about the claim that the heart wants what it's fed? Can you really change the appetites and desires of your heart according to what you feed it?
7. Think about the diet you are feeding your mind and heart these days. What 'junk food' in that diet do you need to cut out? Consider Paul's words of encouragement from Philippians 4:8, "**Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**"
8. Are you willing to commit to setting aside time each day this Advent season to feed God's Word to your heart? If so, what's your plan for doing so? Be as specific as you can be.

### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

When can our family set aside time each day to listen to read scripture together and listen for whatever it is God wants to say to us?