

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**May 10, 2009**  
**Pastor Steve Matthies**

**One Mother's Ponderings**  
**Luke 2:19**

Several months ago I heard a brief opinion piece by author Eric Weiner about airlines adding internet access during flights. Some have already started. In his radio editorial, Weiner described his reaction to the news. "Most people hate flying. I love it. Nothing makes me happier than a long flight—the longer, the better. I once flew nonstop from New York to Bangkok: 17 hours of pure bliss. I packed two books and actually read them. I stared out the window and actually had... thoughts." He goes on to lament the fact that this will soon change. "The airline cabin represents the last refuge from ubiquitous connectivity," he says, "the last place where we are forced, for better or worse, to be with ourselves... and our thoughts."<sup>1</sup>

Just last weekend I flew to Arizona to attend an awards banquet with my parents. Six hours in the air provided some needed down time, and I did just what Weiner describes. I read a book and thought. Some important new insights, as well as reminders of old ones, came to me at a time when I really needed to think about them.

This Mother's Day weekend I want to invite us to slow down, quiet ourselves, and listen to the description of a mother who lived two thousand years ago, who offers a simple but profoundly important lesson for us. Whether we are mothers or fathers, or married or single without children, or boys or girls, it's a lesson that is valuable for every last one of us. This isn't "Seven steps to being a great mom," or "How to raise perfect kids." What this particular mom offers instead is an easily overlooked example of *the tremendous importance of our thoughts*.

Here's how Luke, the Gospel writer, describes what she did: "**Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart**". (Luke 2:19)

The "things" that she treasured and pondered were words a heavenly messenger spoke to ordinary shepherds about the birth of Jesus. We often hear them before Christmas: "**I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord**". (Luke 2:10) But of course we can hear these words differently off season, during the normal routines of life. And it's worth asking: Just what does this message really mean? Why was it delivered? Mary thought long and hard about those questions, and that fact in itself is worth mulling over a bit.

The book of Genesis describes Joseph's father's reaction to one of Joseph's dreams, using almost this same word Luke uses for treasuring up his thoughts. Similarly, in the book of Daniel we learn that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, treasured the words of a vision in his heart. Mary does so, too. She retains what she has heard, storing it up in her heart, tucking it away in

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Weiner, "The End Of Offline In Flight? Say It Ain't So,"  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100558227>.

the back of her mind. But then Luke uses an interesting word to describe what Mary does next. He says she “pondered” what she’d stored in her heart. The picture is of someone having an inner conversation, trying to land on the right meaning of the message they’ve received.

We aren’t very used to this kind of thing anymore. As the pace of life quickens, and the sheer variety of possible entertainments and consumer goods increases, we don’t devote ourselves as much to thought. Frankly, we’re way too busy for that. We’re wired for instant gratification, and thought isn’t instantaneous. One person commented recently, “When we first hear something, we don’t really begin yet to think deeply about it, to ponder. That takes time.” And who has time?

Occasionally we hear the saying, “Don’t just stand there; do something.” But the reverse is just as important: “Don’t just do something; stand there... and ponder, deeply.”

That’s what Mary the mother of Jesus did, both when she heard what the shepherds told her, and again years later when she came upon her now twelve-year-old son teaching Bible scholars in the Jerusalem temple. After she saw him teach and heard his puzzling statement that “I must be in his Father’s house,” Mary again “**treasured all these things in her heart**”. (Luke 2:51) I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest that she probably did a lot of pondering both between those events and long afterward.

In a fast-paced, get-it-done-yesterday world, what Mary did can sound quaint, or maybe out of touch, a waste of time that we could only get away with if we could somehow turn back the clocks, but that just isn’t practical anymore. There’s too much to do.

Interestingly, that’s almost exactly what Thomas Lincoln said nearly two centuries ago when his son, Abraham, spent his time reading books and thinking. His dad decided his son was lazy because he liked to study and think so much. But imagine what our nation and even our world would be like without Abraham Lincoln’s wise and thoughtful leadership. His powerful influence in the world then and since came in no small measure from his long habit of storing up information in his heart and then taking time to ponder it.

We can see this kind of thing in the life of Paul the apostle. After Jesus was revealed to him, according to one of his letters, Paul spent fourteen years in Syria before meeting the other Christians in Jerusalem. (**Galatians 1:21-2:1**) He almost certainly used some of those years, at least, to plumb the depths of the significance of Jesus and let it reshape his mind. In other words, he pondered the meaning of the revelation given to him along the road to Damascus. It would be difficult to find an example of pondering more important for world history than that by Paul in Syria. Paul went on to encourage the conversion of the imagination of all who heard the good news about Jesus. And when that conversion starts in earnest, the rest of life begins to be reshaped according to God’s purposes as well.

In his book, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, Dallas Willard notes this primary connection between whether and what we ponder, and the way we live day to day.

As we first turned away from God in our thoughts, so it is in our thoughts that the first movements toward the renovation of the heart occur... There the light of God first begins

to move upon us through the word of Christ, and there the divine spirit begins to direct our will to more and more thoughts that can provide the basis for choosing to realign ourselves with God and his way... And so we must apply our thinking to and with the Word of God. We must take that word in, dwell upon it, ponder its meaning, explore its implications—especially as it relates to our own lives. What are we to do in the light of the facts of the gospel the revelation of God and of human destiny contained in the Bible...? We must seek the Lord by devoting our powers of thinking to understanding the facts and information of the gospel... When we do so we will be assisted by God's grace in ways far beyond anything we can understand on our own; and the ideas and images that governed the life of Christ through his thought life will possess us.<sup>2</sup>

Of course this is exactly what Mary did. She sought to understand the gospel that the shepherds handed on to her, and later what she saw enacted by her own son in the temple. And how did that shape her life? From all that we hear of her in the Gospel accounts, she was a devoted follower of Jesus, discovering in him a saving meaning that gave substance and structure and purpose to her life on this earth. In fact what we see, though it is not described in these terms, is her deep love for her son.

Interestingly, Willard describes this result, too, of remembering and pondering God's word:

To bring the mind to dwell intelligently upon God as he is presented in his Word will have the effect of causing us to love God passionately, and this love will in turn bring us to think of God steadily. Thus he will always be before our minds. As Thomas Watson beautifully wrote long ago, "The first fruit of love is the musing of the mind upon God. He who is in love, his thoughts are ever upon the object. He who loves God is ravished and transported with the contemplation of God... By this we may test our love to God. What are our thoughts most upon? Can we say we are ravished with delight when we think on God? Do we contemplate Christ and his glory?"<sup>3</sup>

Mary did. And that is why Luke presents her, twice, as an example for his readers. Luke mentions Mary's pondering of the great news about Jesus and his words and actions so that we, too, will learn to do the same. And part of the point is that others may learn from us, as well.

What people will learn from us is not simply the lost art of pondering, but also *what we discover* as we muse upon God's word. One way we grow and mature is through taking in God's word so that we remember it, and then thinking deeply about what we remember. That helps us become the kind of people who are better able to bear witness to our Lord, confidently and intelligently, guiding others through our words and actions.

I recently read the epic Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*. It's a rousing good adventure story about the mighty warrior Beowulf, who fights monsters and rescues those in need, ultimately slaying a dragon but dying as a result. I felt I had a good grasp of the story. But then later I heard a lecture by a professor of medieval literature and it was like a whole new world opened up for me. Why?

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 95, 104-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

Because I had not pondered the story very deeply at all, while the lecturer spent many years doing so. His ponderings benefited me, just as Lincoln's ponderings helped millions. And it's like that with the gospel. Our sustained reflection on the message of Jesus and its implications benefits not only our own lives, but also the lives of others.

Luke, I think, is also particularly concerned to show in Mary's reaction to the angelic message, and later especially in her response to Jesus' teaching, that the gospel doesn't answer all our questions. It doesn't give us a fully developed understanding when we first hear it. In fact, while it answers some questions, it often generates many more. It may comfort us, but it just as often takes us out of our comfort zones, leaving us puzzled as it did Mary.

Note, by the way, that Mary doesn't just think up great thoughts out of thin air. She's not simply looking inside herself for what she needs to live a happy, successful life. She's giving serious and repeated consideration to a message that came to her from elsewhere, from outside herself. Mary's pondering is not reason doing its own thing. It is reason working on revelation that came from God. Mary shows us what Lesslie Newbigin and others have often pointed out: reason and revelation are not at odds with each other, because reason is not a source of truth but rather a capacity God has given us, the capacity for thought. As we see in Mary, thought goes to work on a particular source of truth, God's own self-disclosure first in a message about Jesus and then in the life of Jesus himself.

And note too that Mary treasured these things. That is to say, she remembered them. I've been mentioning this without unpacking it. But the way *we* can do this is to memorize Scripture. I find that a wonderful thing happens when I take the time to memorize Scripture, because it gets down below my conscious level of awareness and goes to work on my heart in ways that probably couldn't happen otherwise, making unexpected connections and creating whole new insights. You can memorize scripture too. If you need tips about how, just ask and I'll share a list of suggestions I've found helpful.

Two things are working together here, and I honestly think they work together in such a way that they don't really work as well apart. One is *remembering*, committing to one's memory the words about Jesus and his own actions and words. The other is *turning those words and stories over again and again in our mind*, trying to get at the real meaning of them.

What kinds of things come to us and through us to others in this way? Over time (and it takes time—that's part of the point of pondering as Mary does it) profound insights into the person of God, and into our lives and the life of the world, come into focus for us. And that in turn functions more and more as the vision of life, of the world, of the purpose of things, of God's intentions, plans, and processes in history and in us. And the reality is that each one of us lives out of some kind of vision. Our vision shapes our lives. Our collective vision as a people shapes our life together in the world, too.

Let me give an example from everyday life. How we as a nation behave in relation to the other nations and peoples of the world flows in large part out of a shared vision for our nation. And one of the most powerful aspects of that vision is, as one historian put it, our sense of exceptionalism. We have since our founding considered ourselves to have a special, privileged

place in the world, a mission that can be fulfilled only by us. And that vision has given rise to certain actions that would not have happened without it. Some actions we look back on and are proud of, and some, when we're honest about it, we recall with a sense of regret, but all were shaped in important ways by our sense of exceptionalism.

In a similar fashion God's message works in important ways—as we ponder it over time, as we mull it over and consider it seriously—to give us a vision for life, which in turn shapes the ways we live our lives moment by moment and day by day. It's true that without vision the people perish. And as Mary shows us, one way God gives us vision is by helping us use our capacity for thought to go to work on the message he reveals to us in his main event in history, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Let me close with a personal story. At the luncheon I attended in Tucson last weekend, my dad was presented with a very special award in recognition of his work as a family doctor in Arizona. He was asked to make a short speech, in which he recounted some of the joys and sorrows of practicing medicine for almost fifty years. He talked about listening to people who are hurting, hugging his patients often, and trying to save too many dying babies in Haiti, sometimes as many as thirty a day. He told of the privilege of sharing in peoples' lives, and he encouraged younger doctors just starting their careers to care deeply for their patients, and assured them that medicine is a wonderful vocation. He told humorous stories and wept as he recalled the love he has experienced, and we all laughed and wept with him.

And then he closed with a quotation, from memory, of something the prophet Micah said long ago: **“He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)** He said those words have guided him all these years, giving shape and substance to his life and to his medical ministry. I hadn't realized they meant so much to him. But as he said it, I realized I'd been watching the outworking of that message my whole life. He'd treasured those words in his heart and pondered them deeply. And the result has been a life for which I and many, many others will be forever grateful.