

January 6, 2008

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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Time to Ponder

Luke 2:13-20

"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

The shepherds returned from the stable "glorifying and praising God." Like the shepherds, we have returned to reality. The commercials for Christmas have given way to commercials for preparing taxes. The world has moved on. Yet, we are called to linger, to ponder the power of this birth in our lives. Christmas Eve, as we gathered to hear the words of Jesus' birth, that word *pondered* seemed to take hold of me. Mary carried the words of the angel that visited her, the hospitality of her cousin Elizabeth who cared for Mary during part of her pregnancy, the journey with Joseph to Bethlehem, the words of the shepherds who told of a bright shining star and the song of the angels, the visit of the magi who came bearing gifts, the birth of the Son of God in a lowly stable, all this and much more she carried in her heart, all this and much more she carried as a treasure. All of this and much more she pondered in her heart. On this Epiphany morning we too are invited to ponder.

Prayer: Slow us down, O God, focus our attention, and help us to see the light that surrounds us this Epiphany morning. Give us pause, to ponder your presence in our lives. Amen.

We live in a culture obsessed with speed. We are ever seeking a faster internet connection, fast or better yet, faster food service, and yesterday I saw a few minutes of a television show that broadcast a drive-through wedding ceremony, it lasted about three minutes. The bride complained that it took longer than she expected.

We are a busy people and we want to spend as little time as possible on any particular task. Make it quick. We have just a minute, we are in a hurry, we are racing from here to there; we are living our lives at warp speed.

Multi-tasking, doing more than one thing at a time, has become a way of life in our culture. In the process, we rarely give one task our undivided attention. We sit in meetings where people are listening and texting at the same time. It is commonplace to see people talking on the phone while driving, or walking or eating. Yet, busy as we are, we are invited to ponder during this season of Epiphany. We are called to carry the wonder of the birth of Jesus within us as we enter into this new year and focus our attention on the light of Christ.

As Dan Bridenbaugh shared earlier in this service, we are in a process of discerning God's vision for Meridian Street. As a congregation, we are going to take a month to ponder. This will be a time to go deep within our hearts and find what is treasured there. It is time to kneel before our God and ask for guidance, clarity, and courage. It is time to ponder, a time to linger with Jesus' birth and ask how it shapes us as God's people.

Epiphany is the celebration of God made manifest in our lives. Ours is a God who delights in us and greets us with open heart and open arms even when we have turned from God. Ours is a God who knows each and every one of us, not just us gathered here, but us, the world of us. God knows us and loves us. We are all precious to God. God laughs with us, rejoices with us, weeps with us, walks with us. God is with us where ever we are. That is the truth of Epiphany. It is a season of hope and light and love. It is a season to allow the light and love of Jesus to take root within us.

I cannot speak for Mary, but I can imagine that there were times in her life with Jesus that she was afraid and confused. I can imagine that there were times when she went deep within the memories she treasured from his birth and found in them comfort and blessing. When Jesus was missing as a young boy, I imagine she consoled herself remembering that he was the Son of God and filled with God's grace. When Jesus was rejected when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth, I imagine she returned to her memories of his birth and pondered them again. When Jesus claimed not to have mother or brother, but embraced all people as family, I imagine she pondered the words of angels and shepherds and wise men to help ease the sting of her son's words. I feel confident that as she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her beloved die, that she pondered again his miraculous beginning.

Mary took the time to ponder her relationship with her son and her God. For as much as we would love to be in control of our lives, we too know that life is a gift, it is unpredictable, and it is fragile. Our hope, our light is not in our own personal will, but in God's grace, in the light and love of Jesus Christ.

As we ponder that reality, we become ever more open to God's vision for us. For in the birth and life of Jesus we find a radical sense of hospitality. In a culture where we are very closed and fearful of anyone who is different or unknown to us, we find it difficult to imagine Jesus' vision for hospitality. In a culture where we are living at warp speed, we do not have time to truly engage one another. Yet, Jesus welcomes at his table the least and the shunned. He openly greets those who were rejected and unclean. He sought out individuals he did not know, people who were not like him, some of them even enemies and he welcomed them as family.

His is a practice of radical hospitality. As we look to our future as the community of faith at Meridian Street, it is imperative that we consider God's heartset of hospitality

toward humanity. We are the recipients of grace and blessing and salvation. Ours is life here and now and life beyond this life. These are not just words. They are the promise and gift of our God.

It seems to be human nature that when we are broken or afraid, we become more open to our deep need for God's presence. Growing ever more dependent upon God is at the core of the faith journey. To remain open and vulnerable to our God even when life is good, the bills are paid and the family is healthy is our challenge. It is our challenge as people of faith to find a need for dependence upon God not only when our dreams are falling apart, but also when our lives are going well.

Lead us, O God, toward deeper dependence upon you and less trust in our own delusion of power and control.

I am confident that there is at least one person here this morning who fully understands that we cannot control all of life, at least one person here this morning who understands at soul level that even with all their best efforts, life is not going the way they planned and that they are utterly and fully dependent upon God's grace this day. Trust me, whoever you are, you are the most blessed among us today. Though you may feel your world tumbling out of control, placing your trust in the love of God is your only hope and you know, of course, it is the only hope for all of humanity. You just realize that truth on a deeper level than most of us gathered here this day.

God will offer you welcome, God will offer you comfort, God will offer you guidance, God will shower you with love and light. You will live through your crisis on this side of life or in life eternal, either way, you will live because of God's radical hospitality and love for you. Be assured that I do not have any particular individual in mind, but I am sure that life is unpredictable and crisis, grief, loss, and fear are all a part of the human condition. It is not of any particular struggle that I speak, rather it is the hospitality of God of which I am assured.

We do not fully understand the hospitality of the Divine, but we are not only blessed by it, we are asked to be radical in the hospitality that we show others. This is far more than just being nice to others. Hospitality is not a marketing tool or a church growth tactic. The hospitality shared by Jesus is the practice of truly caring about another. Radical hospitality is not just caring about another in an attempt to find some personal benefit, but it is expressing genuine concern about what is happening in the life of another, caring about the people that they love, caring about their faith journey. Radical hospitality means truly welcoming all who enter into our lives and more importantly, going out into the world and extending welcome, concern, compassion and action in the name of Jesus Christ and Meridian Street United Methodist Church. Radical hospitality is something we practice here within the safety of this community, but our practice here is only to equip us out there in the world. It is not something to

keep internal, but a way of living in the world. It means seeing people as gifts from God. It means being grace-full even if we are met with rejection. It means sincerely engaging with others.

As we ponder this season, as we allow the light of grace to guide us, might we consider what Jesus' radical hospitality might look like at Meridian Street? As we Imagine Meridian, how will we forge a future that is centered on our openness to the Divine and our hospitality toward others?

I invite you to kneel before the manger once more, look into the eyes of the baby Jesus, allow yourself to be open to his love and light and consider anew what it would mean to walk in his ways.

Pray for your church each and every day during this season of Epiphany and ponder who we are becoming as the people of God at Meridian Street United Methodist Church. It is a process of discernment. It is a process of listening to God, lingering with the Divine and then expressing your insight.

We hope that you will share a few thoughts on the paper provided in your bulletin this morning. You may only begin the process in the next few minutes, but please consider the question before you and share your thoughts. There are baskets at the entrances to receive the papers if you complete them this morning, or you can bring them back next week, you may drop them off in the office, or answer the question online. Whatever you do, please participate in this process. We have some pondering to do. After the fast pace of the holidays, it is time to slow down, ponder and plan.