

To Ponder and Treasure in Our Hearts Richard E. Otty
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury December 27, 2015
Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-14 (used as benediction); Luke 1:28-29, 2:19, 2:41-52

Luke has the sole account of an adolescent Jesus. It is the familiar story telling of the frantic worry of his parents when they can't find their 12-year old in the family caravan returning to Nazareth. Yet, there are also legends of Jesus as a youngster in non-Biblical stories that are not so tame, including tales of the young boy "Jesus striking down playmates and raising them up again, or shaping sparrows out of clay and bringing them to life." [Gaventa, Beverly, Texts for Preaching Year C, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, p. 73)] There are also miraculous stories of a young Jesus in his father's carpenter shop stretching a board that is too short.

This morning, Jesus is found in the temple, seated as a student, amazing the rabbis with both his questions and answers. The text seems out of place for this season. Not only is Jesus suddenly twelve years old, but the setting is the Jewish Passover and we are still in Christmas mode. We are between our celebration of the festival of Christmas and our anticipation of Epiphany, when magi from the East, wise men, kings from the world beyond Israel, arrive to honor the Christ child, but it is Matthew who tells of that arrival.

I invite you to hear the familiar story anew, setting aside any temptation to understand it as a Parenting 101 lesson in which we are to try to dissect Jesus' relationship with his parents in the four brief lines of dialogue, three of which are questions. In this lesson Jesus claims the identity given to him; and Mary, for a third time, ponders the words and events of her son's life.

In the middle of the sermon, I will invite you to share what you might be pondering, particularly as a new year approaches – what makes you anxious, or confused, or what are you anticipating with joy? I know some people do not like such sharing times in worship – it makes them uncomfortable, so I simply encourage you to listen to others' ponderings. And if there are no ponderings, I will simply preach another twenty minutes.

In Jesus' time, people made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which is where the Passover was held. Luke opens by reminding us Jesus' parents kept this tradition, and thus modeled faithfulness for their son. Luke 2:41-52:

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

While Christmas clearance sales are well underway and shoppers out in force according to yesterday's news reports, I always find certain items emerging in the newspaper ads this time of year. Perhaps in anticipation of either the Rose Parade on New Year's Day or the Super Bowl a month later, stores are still hoping we will buy a newer, larger television around which we can center our lives and time; but look carefully at those ads, and many stores have a special section dedicated to storage containers. They are offering salvation for our disorganization.

Ostensibly promoted to foster organization and efficiency, I think there may be a subtle conspiracy in the lure to buy storage containers; namely, to convince us to keep everything we have. The growth of personal storage facilities in which we can place the overflow of our households would seem to evidence our inability to let go and pare down, or perhaps just our lack of time to do so.

In contrast to such a fixation on storage and organization, I have read of a New Year's Eve tradition in some villages in Italy. At the stroke of midnight, a part of greeting the New Year is to throw unwanted items out your window – couches, appliances, broken dinnerware. Beyond any concerns about turning the street into the city dump for a day, or hitting an innocent bystander in the head, the point is that to make room for the new, one cannot hold onto everything that is old, even if you can afford to rent a storage unit or buy \$200 worth of empty, plastic containers.

This morning's Gospel lesson has a different concept of storage. Now, for the third time in Luke, Jesus' mother Mary is noted as pondering, treasuring, storing the words and events of her son's life in her heart. One might have Mary singing, "They call me the ponderer," a parody of Dion's song, "The Wanderer," but the lyrics of that 1962 hit don't quite fit Mary.

Luke tells us that Mary pondered or treasured words and events in her heart: first after Gabriel announced the birth to her (Luke 1:28-29): ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then, after the shepherds left the manger, Luke writes (Luke 2:19): *But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*

Now, once again, at a confusing moment in her son's adolescence, *his mother treasured all these things in her heart.* Mary was still not sure of what all this meant. She was a willing servant of God's plan, but continued to go over and over the things she first heard about her son, and now heard from him.

Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple and unload their expressions of worry. As he does later in life, the seemingly precocious son replies with questions, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" His answer is not to be heard as disrespectful, though Luke may well have purposely included a palpable tension. The scene is loaded with questions and confusions of Jewish tradition. Why is Mary asking the questions and not Joseph which would be his proper role as father in that culture?

Biblical commentators suggest the exact meaning of Jesus' words, "...my Father's house" are not altogether clear, but consensus is it includes being about his Father's business. What is clear, and what might be lost in the seemingly confrontive nature of the parental encounter, is that the words tell of Jesus' understanding of who he is, and mark the center of this story.

Up until this time in Scripture, testimony to the special nature of Jesus has been made by others – angels, and his mother Mary and her cousin Elizabeth before his birth; shepherds and Magi at the manger; and Simeon and Anna when Jesus' parents dutifully presented their firstborn son to God in the Jerusalem temple.

Now, at an age when he has just been or will soon be bar-mitzvahed, Jesus accepts the special claim of God on his life. It will be nearly two decades before he begins his formal ministry, but he is sensing what is ahead; not necessarily the specifics, but the special nature of his work and relationship with God.

Luke is intent on the reader seeing that Jesus was firmly rooted in the Jewish tradition, and a link to the commandment to honor mother and father is clearly discernible in the note that Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents and was obedient to them. Luke's closing line, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor," would be heard by early readers as a parallel to a young Samuel whose parents had visited him in the temple years before.

Jesus is not ready to begin yet, but he is thinking ahead, and I have to think he shares a pondering a spirit with his mother about what the future holds.

[With congregation as a whole, ask about what we are pondering for the future – our lives, our children's lives, our parent's lives, our world, our community, our nation? Will use as responses in our prayer time.]

I think a part of our pondering as people of faith is how the biblical story of Jesus fits with living the Christian life. We may at times wonder, is it true? Is it worth believing? What implications does it have for me? Can I believe it without having to have it all logically fit together? Can I be content with the unexplained nature of Mary's pondering?

Another question has to do with claim. Just as Jesus accepted the claim God had on his life, will we allow the Christmas scene to be more than a still life nativity that is put away after the magi arrive? Will we allow the child to claim our lives and open ourselves to certain uncertainty?

If so, it would seem we are challenged to do more than accumulate and store more and more. Less expensive than new storage containers, are trash bags. Many of us know we need to do some sorting out, certainly of the multitude of material stuff we think we may need someday. Yet, I would suggest, we consider also tossing out anything that has laid claim to our emotions, captivated our energies, or corralled our time that is not life-giving, and may even be life-draining

In our nation, the code words of the year's end seem to be terror and fear...again. My hope is that we will not simply keep pulling out the old storage box of failed ways of solving conflict. I admit that I am prone to an idealism that considers food drops to victims of violence to be an excellent strategy for long-term peace.

A number of years ago, I read of a church in California that undertook a tree-planting project in Afghanistan. I checked out the Bare Roots Project this week and rejoiced it is still active. In cooperation with a group called Afghans4Tomorrow, this church has helped plant 10,000 fruit trees and 2000 shade trees in people's homes, 3000 pine trees in urban hillsides, and many rose bushes at the Woman's Garden of Kabul. [<http://www.togetherweserve.org/bare-roots-project/>]

This project is likely one of hundreds if not thousands of small good works that don't make headlines. Yet, as I think of the world today, I am thinking it would be good for us to find these beacons of hope, to help dispel our own despair and halt any cynicism that there is nothing that can be done.

Just as Jesus suggests his parents should have known where to find him, I think we have a good sense of where we are to be found in the new year. So, we can ask whether we will be found in a new place planting trees and hope, or simply staring at empty storage bins waiting to be filled with that which we can't bear to part? Perhaps we might be found in places and caught doing things which will shock others as much as Jesus' parents were surprised to find him in the temple. And when found, we might also respond, "Did you not know I would be here, doing this?," offered with a confident humility that indicates our courage to allow God to do a new thing in our lives.

As we close out the calendar year, it seems we are invited by a pondering Mary to consider what we are treasuring in our hearts, rather than what we are storing in our Rubbermaids. As one writer sees her, Mary is standing with the church, pondering and trusting, "consenting to obedience, and straining to comprehend." [Ibid., p. 74] A challenge for us is whether we can live with Mary's uncertainty: waiting to see what unfolds, who her son will become, where God will lead him – but finally, where her son will lead us.