

December 27, 2015

TEXT: Luke 2:15–24

TITLE: Treasuring, Pondering, Presenting

It is the Sunday after Christmas. By and large, whatever things were planned for Christmas are now over and done with. A family gathering—a special meal—exchanging presents—sleeping in—all that’s likely been accomplished. So what now? It’s the Sunday after Christmas; Monday is lurking just over the horizon. As people touched by the glad tidings of Christmas, what do we do now?

Back in 1996, I proposed to my wife Beth. After she said “Yes” and we celebrated for a moment, there was a pause and then we asked ourselves, “Now what?” For all the protocol associated with getting engaged—getting a ring, picking a special time, popping the question—there’s no script for what you’re supposed to do right after you get engaged. We thought for a moment, recognizing that we were beginning a new chapter in our life together and decided the first step was to let our families know. Then, once the butterflies had left my stomach, I realized I was hungry so we got something to eat. After that things unfolded and the engagement script gave way to the wedding planning script and here we are today.

Life is full of “what now?” moments. Times when you’ve stood on one side of a line and then crossed over to the other side of that line and there’s no going back: graduation from high school or college; walking up the aisle after getting married; saying “Yes” to a job offer; deciding to move to a new city. We say “what now?” after both good events and bad events: What now when the newborn baby is placed in our arms? What now when the doctor says you have cancer? What now when a dream comes true—or when a parent or spouse dies?

Mary and Joseph definitely had a “what now” moment right after Christmas. In time the shepherds left, the magi came and went, the registration required by the Roman government was completed. The “what now” for the Holy Family basically came down to three verbs: treasuring, pondering, and presenting. I suggest that the same three verbs should still guide us when we’re faced with “what now?” moments.

Scripture says that when the shepherds burst into the manger area, out of breath from jogging in from the fields and still exhilarated from the angel’s visitation, they told Mary and Joseph what had happened to them and “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” I’m pretty sure all the characters in the Christmas drama reacted in much the same way: the shepherds treasured and pondered the good news; the wise men treasured and pondered what it meant to be led by a star to visit a child; Joseph treasured and pondered what sort of future awaited this little boy called Immanuel, God-with-us. And Mary, with a mother’s deep love and protective instinct, treasured and pondered everything perhaps a bit more than all the others.

The responses of treasuring and pondering go together—to give thanks and to give thought. If it is a time of joy, it is fitting to give thanks to God for blessings received and to picture how best to go forward by faith into the new chapter unfolding before you. And if it is a time of sorrow, we still begin by remembering how precious life is, how grateful we are for past times with loved ones and days of health, and then we ponder what will come next ever aware that God is beside us always.

The Psalms also help us remember these two important verbs. Psalm 103 begins *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all God's benefits.* Psalm 46 puts it even more succinctly: *Be still and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.* Treasuring and pondering.

A few days before Christmas, I was working in my office when my phone rang and Kay at the front desk told me that a man named Ralph was here and wished to speak with the pastor. The name didn't ring a bell and I instinctively assumed that this would be a stranger looking for some sort of handout from the church. Pastors are human and just as prone to feelings of cynicism and skepticism in these moments as is everyone else. So when I saw the man by the front desk and we went to a side room to chat, I was polite yet guarded. It was an older man, wearing a security service uniform, and he handed me a card in an envelope. He said that two years ago he'd been without food and had been turned down for assistance from the food pantry. He'd come here and had been given \$20. Eventually he'd come out of retirement and found another job, but he'd always remembered that act of kindness. He handed me an envelope with \$30 in it. As beautiful as this Christmas has been, the worship services, reaching our capital campaign goal, time with family and friends, that graceful, humble moment with Ralph for me still stands near the top of my Christmas memory list.

The other verb associated with Mary and Joseph right after Christmas is the act of "presenting" —presenting the child to be circumcised, initiated into the Jewish faith; presenting the child to be named Jesus, just as the angel foretold to Mary nine months earlier, presenting the child in the temple as one who is "holy to the Lord" along with the required sacrificial gift of two young doves. We easily fall into the trap of thinking Christmas is only about presents. When Heather was leading her time with the children early on Christmas Eve, she re-told the Christmas story and asked the kids what sort of things they wonder about when they think of the birth of Jesus. Several of the little ones wondered less about the miracle of Bethlehem and more about the miracle of how Santa gets all those presents all around the world. The worship service focused on the Christ story almost got steered by the kids into the woods of commercialism and Kris Kringle before Heather skillfully got everything back on the spiritual highway once again.

Mary and Joseph left the stable—stepped away from where they were into the place where God was calling them to go. They had to move out into the world and they chose to do so as people of faith. As pious Jews, they followed the rituals of their beliefs and went to the temple—to give thanks to God for the gift of their son, to name him, to pray over him, to stand beside other people of faith who through the centuries had the exact same things when their children had been born.

“Presenting” is living in such a way that faithfulness is evident in your words, deeds and demeanor. We are not perfect in this—which is why we regularly offer prayers of confession. But the rituals of our faith help us present ourselves as people of faith. While hundreds of paths unfolded before Mary and Joseph after Christmas, they chose to travel one that led to God’s temple. Although hundreds of paths unfolded before you on this Sunday after Christmas, you chose this morning to take one that led to a time of prayer and worship. And no matter what tomorrow holds—no matter what news is going to cause you to stop and think “OK, what now?”—God in Christ calls us to present ourselves as people who trust in the Lord always.

Near the end of the bible, in the little book of 1 Peter, it says this, “*Come to [Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.*” (1 Peter 2:4–5) Too often we may say to ourselves, “I could never be so public about my faith. I’d be hesitant to speak up and talk about God.” Well then, imagine yourself as a living stone—one part of the architecture of faith present in the world right now.

“Presenting” is putting yourself in the place where God needs you to be. Mary and Joseph “presented” Jesus in the temple, because their faith told them this was right to do. And unbeknownst to them, it was there that the prophets Simeon and Anna would come up to them and offer new prophecies about this child bringing salvation to all the world. None of that would have happened if they’d simply skipped the temple and chosen a quick road out of town after Jesus’ birth.

We treasure and ponder and present ourselves. That involves asking a series of “What now, Lord” questions: “Where is God in this moment? What would Christ have me say or do in light of what I’m facing? How do I sense the Holy Spirit guiding me?” Then, in response we pray, “Gracious Lord, here I am. Use me this day, right here, right now.” May we hold fast to the three verbs of the Sunday after Christmas: treasure, ponder, and present.