

Sermon for January 4, 2015 (Christmas 2, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Psalm 84; Luke 2:41-52

Title: All These Things

“His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51).

What are the things that Mary treasured in her heart? And how do you treasure the words of Jesus and the stories about Jesus in your heart?

My friends, let us take some time this morning to consider Mary, the mother of our Lord, as our example and our model in contemplation.

But first let me ask you a question: what is contemplation? How do you understand the work of contemplation?

If ordinary prayer is primarily vocal and directive, then meditation is mental and reflective prayer by which we think about certain aspects of faith in order to gain understanding.

Contemplation is different and beyond both of these and consists in a quiet and loving gaze upon God in the midst of other activities.
It is an inner state of heart which transcends outward circumstances.

Contemplation is simply being present with God in the midst of life.

Kathleen Norris, after spending time in a Benedictine monastery and reflecting upon the work of contemplation, wrote these following words with deep insight:

“The ordinary activities,” Norris wrote, “[which] I find most compatible with contemplation are walking, baking bread, and doing laundry” (The Quotidian Mysteries).

To that list, I would add running (which is just a faster form of walking!), chopping firewood, and playing with dogs! But those are my choices.

What would you add to the list?

What are the activities of your life in which you are able to maintain an active sense of God's presence?

Contemplation is an invitation to practice a continual awareness of God's presence in the midst of everyday life.

The temptation is for us to think that, if we are to spend time with God – or if we are to do something important and transformative for God, then it has to be something BIG and exceptional and special.

Let's go back and look again at our gospel story from Luke.

We read this story today, because we are already beginning to move through the cycle of the Church Year. The Lord has been born. After eight days, he was circumcised and named. Next week, we move on to the Baptism of the Lord and the launch of his public ministry.

This story of Jesus staying behind in the Second Temple to listen and to learn – this is the ONLY thing spoken about Jesus in the biblical texts about the first 30 years of his life! 30 years!

Only Luke's Gospel contains this story, and except for this story alone, the Gospels spend no time at all discussing the childhood, adolescence or early adulthood of the Lord.

Think about this for a moment. Don't you think it odd?

I mean, wasn't there ANYONE in the early church who wanted to know what Jesus was like as a young boy or as a young man?

Well, the answer to that is YES! It seems that there were many who were interested. We know this because there were other gospels written that included fantastical stories about Jesus as a child.

In a text called the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the regular Gospel of Thomas), there is this famous story which even made it into the Quran!

It goes like this.

“When this boy, Jesus, was five years old, he was playing at the ford of a rushing stream. He was collecting the flowing water into ponds and made the water instantly pure. He did this with a single command. He then made soft clay and shaped it into twelve sparrows. He did this on the [seventh] day, and many other boys were playing with him.

But when a [man] saw what Jesus was doing while playing on the sabbath day, he immediately went off and told Joseph, Jesus' father: ‘See here, your boy is at the ford and has taken mud and fashioned twelve birds with it, and so has violated Shabbat.’

So Joseph went there, and as soon as he spotted him, he shouted, ‘Why are you doing what's not permitted on Shabbat [the Sabbath]?’

But Jesus simply clapped his hands and shouted to the sparrows: ‘Be off, fly away, and remember me, you who are now alive!’ And the sparrows took off and flew away noisily. The [people] watched with amazement, then left the scene to report to their leaders what they had seen Jesus doing.”

As I mentioned, the Quran includes a reference to this story which suggests that Allah had made it happen – that Allah had wanted the clay birds to fly.

There are all kinds of stories like this. Stories of Jesus healing other children who get bitten by snakes, bringing back to life children who fall off roofs while playing. There are even stories of Jesus rebuking and challenging his tutors, since – after all – he has divine wisdom which far surpasses all that they could possibly know!

In some ways, these are interesting and fascinating, aren't they?

But here is the crucial point. These stories were part of the early church movement. They were shared and copied and read aloud by many.

But, eventually, the Church sifted through all of the writings that were floating out there and, slowly, gradually and definitely, a consensus was reached about which texts were divinely inspired and which ones were interesting, maybe fascinating, perhaps even edifying, but certainly NOT inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Eventually, all of these texts about the special knowledge and power of Jesus in his childhood and youth were rejected as being incongruous with a true understanding of who Jesus is.

My friends: I think that there is a deep message here for all of us in the rejection of those stories. In this case, we learn by what is missing from the Bible.

In a sense, what the early church leaders have told us is that the childhood of Jesus was not extraordinary after all. After his birth, it was, in fact, quite ordinary and uneventful.

And that is okay. In fact, it is good.

I am certain that it was not easy to be the mother of Jesus. Scripture tells us that he was tempted in every way, just as we are. I feel certain that the process of adolescence was a challenge in his household as well.

But you see, even this is oh so ordinary and uneventful.

And that is good. This one was fully God and also fully human – two different things combined in one person. A hypostatic union is what we call it in theology.

Let me suggest to you that the absence of any inspired texts about the early life of Jesus tells us that these years were very normal and ordinary and honestly not noteworthy in any sense.

And that is very good news. God in human flesh enjoying a normal human existence. Doing things like walking, baking and eating bread, helping with laundry and dishes, playing with dogs, perhaps even chopping firewood and helping to shovel away that rare Palestinian snowfall.

Even in our lives, God is present in all of these things.

God is found, God is met, God is experienced in the normal moments of life.

“His mother, Mary, treasured all these things in her heart.”

What is the place for contemplation in your life? How do you actively and intentionally treasure the words about Jesus and the words spoken by Jesus to your spirit?

Consider the most mundane activities of your daily life. Now consider one or two ways by which you might practice the presence of God while doing these things.

If you can learn to know God and experience God in the normal parts of everyday life, I promise that your heart will be the better prepared for God’s presence in every moment of life, even the special and memorable ones.

May it be so among us who are called to live as members of the family of Jesus.
Amen.