

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent Midweek 1
Wednesday, December 2nd, 2020

Sermon: Prepare Ye: Ponder¹

Texts: Luke 1:26-38

Focus: It's okay to think and wonder and ask questions about the Christian faith.

Function: That they would ponder anew the marvelous good news of Jesus' birth.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. It is common in our world today to suggest that if you are a rational, thinking person, you would never become a Christian. The world quickly dismisses as irrelevant those of us who are conservative, Bible-believing Christians because we believe in such silly, impossible things like a literal six-day creation, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, and that a great fish (whale) actually swallowed Jonah. Add to that our foundational belief—that Christ rose again from the dead after being buried for three days—and you might as well punch your card at the loony farm. Simply put: smart people don't join the Church. No, the so-called scientific, intellectually superior elites of our age look down upon those of us who espouse such beliefs.

And yet in the story of the Annunciation, we find in the virgin Mary that thinking people do exist in the Church, and in fact, the very first Christian—little Mary—was an incredibly rational person. There wasn't a stupid or superstitious bone in her body. When confronted with the miracle of Christmas, Mary had questions and doubts. She pondered God's promises in view of all her experience and knowledge of the Scriptures and reproductive science. Yet ultimately,

¹ The sermon *theme* comes from a series by R. Reed Lessing titled "Prepare Ye," but the sermon is my own.

she came to believe and receive the wonderful Good News that God was going to save the world through her miracle baby.

When the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary, he said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28, ESV).² (The Latin rendering is where we get the first line of the *Ave Maria*: “Hail Mary, full of grace!”) Now in the Bible, most people visited by angels jump out of their shoes and scream so loud they can hear you halfway down the block. But it’s not the glorious appearance of the angel that disturbed her; it was his words. What in the world was he talking about? What did it mean that she was favored by God, and that he was with her? We’re told that she tried to “discern” what sort of greeting this might be. The NIV says she “wondered,” and the RSV says she “pondered.” This is not the fluid daydreams of a teenaged girl, however. The Greek word (*dialogidzomai*), is an ancient accounting term that means to reconcile accounts and examine the books.³ As I said, Mary was a thinking person—not a fool.

What the angel said next was even more surprising than what came before:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30-33).

This wonderful announcement was quite a mouthful! Mary was going to get pregnant and give birth to the Messiah, the son of David and Son of God, who would reign forever as King over Israel. Wow! What do you make of all that?!

But Mary was stuck on the first part—that she would bear a son. “How will this be,” she asked, “since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). A very reasonable question, indeed!

² All Scriptures, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

³ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth behind the Birth of Christ* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 81.

After all, Mary was a virgin who had never had relations with a man. As if to underscore this fact, Luke tells us three times in the Christmas story that she was a virgin (Luke 1:27, 34; 2:36). (*Aside:* For this reason, it is unfortunate that our Holden Evening Prayer liturgy calls her a “woman” instead of a “virgin.” She was *not* a woman. She was likely a tender youth of 13-15 years of age. We actually wrote to the publisher, asking permission to change the wording to match the Biblical text, but they refused. So “woman” it is!).

Yes, Mary was a virgin. But who ever heard of a *pregnant* virgin? That’s about the biggest oxymoron there is. Which of you would believe your teenaged daughter or granddaughter if she were to come home and announce she is pregnant, but no, don’t worry, Mom and Dad, I never had sex?

Now it is true that some species of worms and other invertebrates may reproduce asexually by what is known as parthenogenesis (literally, “virgin birth”). But humans are not known to reproduce in this way! It only happened once in the history of the world—at the conception and birth of Jesus Christ.

In response to Mary’s question, by way of explanation, Gabriel said, “Oh, the Holy Spirit will make you pregnant.... Because nothing is impossible with God.”

You can imagine little Mary, perplexed and dumbfounded, nodding her head and thinking, “Sure, thanks! That explains *everything*.” And maybe those thoughts did run through her mind. But what she actually said was this: “Behold, I am the servant [handmaiden] of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your Word” (Luke 1:38). In other words, even though she didn’t fully understand, Mary humbly submitted to God’s will and believed his Word. She didn’t understand the mechanics of how everything would take place, but she trusted and believed that Almighty God is powerful, good, gracious, and kind. He works all things to good

for those who love him (Rom. 8:28), so if this bizarre happening was part of his plan, then so be it. She would do her part.

In his *Christmas Book*, Martin Luther says that unless Mary believed the angel's Word, she would not have been able to conceive.⁴ "She might have doubted, but she shut her eyes and trusted in God who could bring all things to pass, even though common sense were against it; and because she believed, God did to her as he had said."⁵ For Christ to be conceived in Mary's womb, she had to receive God's gift by faith. And for us to receive Christ in our hearts, we must receive the message of Christmas—and the cross—by faith alone.

This is not to throw reason to the wind! But to believe that God will make good and deliver on his promises—that is a most sensible thing to do indeed.

It's quite acceptable for us to think and to question, to reason and doubt, and to pray about the things that are difficult to believe. We ourselves must have mercy on those who doubt (Jude 22). But at the end of all our seeking, searching, and probing, we will find only one answer: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born in human flesh as Immanuel, "God-with-us."

Even Mary, the mother of our Lord, never stopped being surprised at Jesus. On the night of his birth, after the shepherds regaled her with their story of the angelic choir singing in heaven, we are told that "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). She did the same when she encountered her son, the boy Jesus, debating theology with the rabbis in the Temple (Luke 2:51). Mary pondered these things in her heart. She never stopped pondering. And we mustn't either, so long as our pondering always brings us back to the lowly

⁴ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther Christmas Book*, ed. Roland Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 23.

⁵ Luther, *Christmas Book*, 22.

manger, the bloody cross, and the empty tomb. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.