

When Mary Kneelt Beside the Manger
Luke 2:1-20

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But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.
Lk. 2:19

Obviously we have no way of knowing with any degree of certainty what Mary was quietly thinking that night of nights so long ago. Novelists, perhaps, with their gifted imaginations, powers of perception, and talent for description, might be able to give us a good look into her mind. But, even without those skills, the rest of us can do a fairly good job of it, drawing upon what we know of parenthood and faith.

She was grateful for the gift of Jesus.

To begin with, can't we say Mary must have been grateful for the gift of Jesus, his safe and healthy birth? If your family is like mine, you don't have to go too many generations back to find stillbirths, even strings of them, or infants not healthy enough to thrive. Giving birth is still full of risk, and lots of it, though less than there used to be in those long ago days when it was not unusual for mothers or babies or both to die at birth. So Mary must have been grateful for a safe and healthy delivery, a baby with all his parts in place, his breathing good and clear, his appetite normal, and his swaddling cloths – well- filling neither too much nor too little. In spite of the carol that tries to claim “no crying he makes,” Mary must have heard his cries, and learned to know the meaning of each one, whether of hunger or weariness or irritation or boredom. As she looked upon her little one, Mary must have had gratitude in her heart, thankfulness for Jesus and his healthy birth.

By a kind of extension, we can be thinking that, too, this Christmas Eve, and have in our hearts a glad gratefulness for Jesus. Ours is less a gratitude for his safe birth than for his strong life. There is a good deal we do not know about Jesus, but we can know with a kind of certainty that he actually lived. Jesus of Nazareth is no myth, no figment of the imagination. The sources beyond the Bible are few, admittedly, but they are there and they are enough to substantiate that he did, indeed, once walk the earth as a real, live person.

We can be grateful, too, for what we have come to know of Christ. The blind poet Matheson wrote,

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain
That mourn shall tearless be.¹

If you are like me, then there are moments in your life, high, bright moments of joy, of love, of clarity, of courage, and you can put your finger on these, and, when you trace them back, they lead to Jesus. He has made our love more loving, our hope more hopeful, our sorrows bearable, our courage brave, our labors worth the effort, and our lives worth the living. We have reason to kneel before this manger and give thanks for Jesus.

She pledged herself to Jesus.

But Mary did more than give thanks for Jesus as she knelt quietly beside his bed. Can't we say, too, that, in some kind of silent conversation, she pledged herself to him? What are the words to that old lullaby?

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,
Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird.
And if that mockingbird don't sing,
Mama's going to buy you a diamond ring.
And if that diamond ring turns brass,
Mama's going to buy you a looking glass.

Isn't that reflective of the high pledge of any parent worthy of the role, of any of us who are worthy of the role? We pledge our lives to our little ones, we pledge to show up, to be there, to calm, to soothe, to protect, to provide. Something of that must have been in Mary's heart that night, something of the pledge to be for Jesus the kind of mother he needed her to be. I bet many of you – mothers and fathers alike – can remember making that same pledge, not by a manger, but in the middle of some night as you held your little one in your arms and rocked her to sleep, or walked him until his tears subsided. So Mary must have pledged herself to Jesus.

Mary's pledge and efforts were necessary to feed and clothe Christ, to keep him alive. If the spirit of Christmas and the will and way of Christ are to advance today, we have to pledge ourselves to him, too. Have you noticed this about the New Testament? In it Christ does not ask for worshipers; he asks for followers.² He does not want people to admire him, even on bended knee, without taking up his cause. Songs without service are empty, worship without work is vain. The person committed to Christ stands for his cause and does not just sit in the sanctuary. He shines a light and does not just hold a candle. She tries to lift another's burden; she does not just bow her head. The committed Christian makes no claim to have arrived anywhere – and certainly at no kind of

perfection. Rather, the committed Christian is one who is ready to begin, in whatever way he or she can, to advance Christ's cause of love and justice and peace.³

She wondered what her life would be like with Jesus.

But Mary did more – didn't she? – than thank God for Jesus and pledge her commitment to Jesus. Can't we also say that, in the quiet of that night, she wondered what her life would be like with Jesus?

I remember once hearing a speaker say that every time we walk into a room of strangers, we inwardly say, knowingly or unknowingly, "What are these people going to do with me?"

Every parent beside every newborn has wondered something like that themselves. Where will this little person take me? What will she demand I change? What will he make me do? How is life going to be different with a baby in it? They change us – don't they? – even as they accept us as we are. Without a doubt, Mary had all that running through her head. What would her life be like with Jesus in it?

Christmas invites you to imagine just that for yourselves. What would your life be like with Christ really in it? The temptation is to think the new life will be cramped and somehow less. Well, candidly, some things are clipped, but life is never less with Christ.

Before certain someones came along, I had both a library and a study in my Belvidere parsonage. My library, peaceful, bookish, quiet, soon became the baby's room, then the girls' room, and, for a time, the kids' room. It lost its bookishness, but not its peace. And not for anything would I go back to what it was. Not for anything would I trade what I have now for what I had before. Something was clipped. Nothing was lost. Everything was gained.

The apostle Paul came to this realization about Jesus. Everything he thought he had before he met Christ he counted as nothing in comparison to meeting, having, and enjoying Christ (Phil. 3:7).

That is the promise for you tonight. Quietly, in your heart – though, to seal it, you may want to tell someone – give thanks for Jesus, commit yourself to him, and get ready for all the good he will give you and make of you.

¹ George Matheson, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," *The Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), # 399.

² Elton Trueblood, *The Lord's Prayers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 66.

³ Elton Trueblood, *Alternative to Futility* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 63.