

There is one element of the Christmas story I want to return to this morning. The shepherds. They went to the stable and they found the Christmas miracle unfolding before them. And Luke tells us they made known to everyone gathered in that stable what had been told to them from the angels about this Child, the one we know as the baby Jesus.

And do you know what Luke says? Luke says that everyone there in that stable were amazed. They were amazed. Luke loves that word. In fact, Luke is sometimes called the gospel of amazement. More than all of the other gospel writers combined, more than Mark, Matthew and John, Luke writes about amazement more than 50 times. In his gospel Luke talks about the amazement people find in Jesus. And sometimes more than once in the same sentence. Luke puts amazement on the tongues of virtually everyone who encounters Jesus, maybe because it was Luke's own encounter with faith that left him utterly amazed. Amazement appears on the tongues of both the rich and the poor, on the lives of both the powerful and the outcast, but especially on people in need of hope or healing. They encounter Jesus and they are amazed. All of these people leave changed in Luke.

The gospel follows up on stories of amazement with stories of belief. Belief, not just changing of mind or conviction, but belief as changing of life, and what people dedicate their essence to. Remember there are disciples who would drop out of everything, men and women who would run off to tell everyone of what they knew. There would be crowds who would clamor and follow Jesus even without food for supper that night. There would be the poor and the sick, there would be those who come back to say thanks, and there would be the outcasts who would find wholeness and community.

Amazement. It is one of the things I think we all hope for each Christmas. That somehow this year in the midst of everything unfolding, we will be amazed. We will leave changed. That this year a miracle will come to us. It will in fact be born in us. A miracle that changes everything – ourselves and the world around us. O God, send that miracle to change everything! Amen?

I don't know about you, but it might be the thing we prayed for extra hard this year. Something. Anything. To change our lot, to change our shared lot, to change what we are experiencing, and to change those headlines that we are reading around the world of pain and grief, of loss and suffering.

We have now been in this hunkered down, get-through-it, survive-it-somehow mode for about nine months, if you can believe it. Nine months. But I know this: If this Christmas is going to be the kind of amazing one that leaves a lasting mark on who we are and how live, we need to pay close attention not just to those shepherds but even closer to Jesus' mother Mary. Who, by the way, went through nine months of her own ordeal, too. And she was not one ever in those nine months to give in or to get swept away.

Mary, Luke's gospel tell us over and over again, was the one who pondered. Mary gives us a model in our ninth month of how she handled her ninth month, not just to handle that moment, but rather to handle all the moments where we are faced with challenge or mystery, or perhaps even sheer exhaustion. For in each of the pivotal moments of Mary's encounter when she was

faced with any of those things, she took those moments in. She wondered and she pondered. She treasured.

Do you remember? It is what she did when Gabriel came with his announcement. Despite the physical impossibility of it all, and despite the overwhelming social challenges that it would give rise to, she pondered when he came. She wondered when he came. She opened her heart to what might yet be.

And remember, then, she gave birth, not in a comfortable bed with fresh linens. Rather, she gave birth in a barn surrounded by animals in the middle of the night in a town she did not know. And yet Luke tells us on that night when everyone else was amazed, on that night Mary stayed present and pondered.

I know the song says that not a sound Jesus made, but he would have been a crying baby because he was fully human, after all. In the midst of lowing cattle, in the midst of strangers barging into the barn claiming they were sent by angels and telling her outlandish things, what does Mary do? She ponders. She gives weight to it all. She thinks about it all. She takes it all in. She treasures it and she ponders it in her heart.

It is also what Mary will do for the next number of years. In fact, 12 years later when Jesus was 12, and amazed all those people in the Temple with his teaching, Luke tells us that there Mary is again pondering. Taking it in, wondering what this all means, letting it bounce around in her heart.

You see, Mary at her heart was a ponderer, and we need to be, too. Because here is what Mary knew. She knew that this whole thing unfolding around her was way bigger than she was. She knew that the coming of her son was not the answer, but rather the unfolding of God's love. And through this Child lives would be healed and people made whole. She knew that God was sending a bundle of love wrapped in human flesh to somehow save us all, even if she didn't grasp it. That is precisely why she pondered. And if God wasn't behind it all, it would be lunacy. It would be sheer madness. But instead, she knew it was an invitation to open herself up to something bigger.

Sometimes I think in the midst of Christmas we take this story for granted. We listen to the words that we have heard countless times before. And maybe we are amazed. I don't know, maybe you still have goosebumps lingering from Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. But too often I think that by this time that amazement has washed over us. We lose sight of how radical and crazy this whole thing is, how the coming of the Christ Child into the world changes everything again. Far too often I think even more we forget what the angels said to the shepherds. The baby wasn't just born to Joseph and Mary, but that baby was born to all of us. To you the people, the angels said, to us.

Friends, we are basking in the truth that Jesus, the Ancient of Days, the Word of God, the Savior of all that is, has been born again to each of us. A proposition that ought to be mind-blowingly amazing. But if that has the chance to be life changing, if it has the chance to change how we live and who we follow, then somehow, somewhere, I implore each of you to take that truth, that

image, that scene and the familiar words of the Christmas story into your hearts, and I want you to treasure them. Find a time to ponder them. And let them simply sit, that they might give you a direction to follow.

Christ being born for you, bringing healing, or at least the ability to hang on. Christ being born for you offering you new life, or at least a bud to start to form that will blossom in some way, even if you don't know how. Christ being born for you, to shine light wherever you carry shadow.

Friends, the most amazing thing has already happened. Christ has been born to you. Whatever you do, don't let it wash over you. Take it into your hearts and ponder. As the gifts of Christmas become part of the landscape of your home, remember the spirit in which they were given, echoes of the gift of Christ. Just as that baby was the tangible, physical manifestation of God's love, let those presents be the love of the one who gave to you. New life born into your ongoing relationship.

Be perplexed. Sit in wonder. Take time to ponder. And then I have no doubt you will be amazed. And like the characters of old in Luke, you will leave this season changed. And that will be nothing short of miraculous, too. Amen.