

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. Amen. Tonight we join with Our Lord's mother, focusing on these words from the Gospel: *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

Imagine these events from Mary's perspective. Nine months previous, she had been visited by the archangel Gabriel who brought her the astounding news that she would conceive and give birth to the Son of God. Shortly afterwards, Joseph told her that the angel had confirmed the message to him in a dream. God made a promise. There was one more confirmation when she visited her relative Elizabeth and Elizabeth said that her own baby leaped in her womb when Mary greeted her.

Other than that, we can assume that the months of Mary's pregnancy were like any other mother's. Morning sickness, strange cravings, all kinds of unanswered questions. These were months of waiting, possibly months where she had to endure shaming from those who did not believe her, months of traveling – it's about 80 miles on foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, we are to assume he looked like a normal baby. He didn't have a halo around his head. He didn't turn water into milk. He probably *did* cry. Everything appeared to be ordinary. Mary might have been wondering what God was going to do next.

Then the shepherds arrived and told her their story – how an angel had appeared to them, how God's glory shone around them, and that the angel told them their savior, Christ the Lord had been born tonight, how they were told to look for a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, and how then they saw a huge heavenly army praising God with words telling what this meant: in heaven God was glorified, and on earth, God was bringing peace to all mankind. Imagine how delighted Mary was to hear this?! It happened just as God promised, and Mary knew it, and she remembered it, and she believed it. *She treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

To "treasure something up" means to store information in the mind for careful consideration, to hold in one's memory. This event was blazed so clearly in Mary's memory that when she recalled her Son's birth, she almost felt like she was there all over again. Mary's crystal clear memory of these things is important for several reasons. For one, the Church Fathers tell us that Luke the evangelist relied on Mary's firsthand memories as he composed his account of the Gospel. Mary's remembrance is also important as an example of faith for us to emulate. God made a promise to her. Mary remembered and trusted God's promise. God fulfilled his promise. We should do the same.

God's promises are for us too. As we await God's final fulfillment of those promises, we should **remember** what he has done, and have faith that he will keep his promises. Unfortunately though, the human memory is fallen like all of our other faculties – the mind, the heart, the desires, are all corrupt. We often forget

God and his promises, or we “pay him no mind” most of the time, and ultimately every single one of us, from the most to the least “religious” has a problem of trusting everything and anything other than God to give us security and meaning in this life and the next. If we think we perfectly trust in God alone, we would be lying to ourselves. If we think we **remember** his saving acts and his promises faithfully, we are lying to ourselves.

What are some of the things we “treasure up” in our memories? Our memories are filled with all kinds of things – some important, some fun, some less important, and some evil. Like Mary, those of you who are parents probably have clear memories of the births of your children. We probably all have treasured Christmas memories. I surveyed my Facebook friends on what they have committed to memory and got quite a list. Some said they have entire movie scripts memorized: for example: every Lord of the Rings movie, Hoosiers, Planes-Trains-and-Automobiles, and High School Musical...some mentioned memorable lines from movies such as – “Leave the gun, take the cannoli,” “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means,” or “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” Others named music and songs they had committed to memory from Christmas carols to “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air” theme song, to commercial jingles for carpeting, to Beethoven’s 9th symphony. For others it was poetry: Shakespeare or “T’was the Night Before Christmas”. Some named practical things like the social security numbers, ones union card number, or how to make a martini, which may not seem practical unless your family owns a bar and restaurant! One person said “phone numbers”! Not many of us remember phone numbers anymore. We often remember things that are precious or important to us. Jesus said as much, “*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*” I’m not suggesting there is anything wrong with memorizing any of these things. Actually, quite the opposite. It is a blessing when we are able to recall important information. Just pointing out that the things we remember tend to reveal what is most important to us...or most traumatic.

Our memories are filled with all kinds of things that are fun but they also contain darkness, sadness, things that have left permanent scars on us. War veterans are visited by relentless images of the carnage they witnessed. Now more than ever, many men and women have memories full of pornographic images; images that dull and damage their capacity for intimacy with real people. One of my brother pastors witnessed his mother die of a heart attack right before his eyes at a young age. These memories are hard to shake and they are all symptoms of life in a fallen world.

Mary treasured up God’s promises and pondered in her heart how they were being fulfilled in her infant Son. With our memories brimming with so much that is good, bad, and ugly, is there any room left in our treasuries for the good news of great joy, which the angels sang on the first Christmas?

Our memories are fallen; they are hopelessly broken. And yet...as He so often does, God works in the midst of our fallenness. Rather than erase our memories or destroy our memories, he works through them. Amid the fun, the practical, the useless, and the painful things stored in our memories, many of us can also recall the things of God – The Lord’s Prayer, the “Now I lay me down” prayer, the Johnny Appleseed prayer, our favorite Psalms and hymns, our confirmation verses and various parts of the Small Catechism – those are part of our

memories too. God works his saving truth into our fallenness, into our imperfect memories so that we can treasure him up like Mary did.

God reminds us again and again of how he sent us salvation on Christmas. The church year repeats over and over. Just as we tell and retell our own treasured stories, so the story of Jesus is told and retold and it leaves a permanent mark on us; the Christmas story, heard again tonight is for us to treasure up and ponder in our hearts too. For Christ was not just born to Mary but as the angels announced to the Shepherds, so they say to us, “*Unto you is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*” Unto you. He is just as much yours as he was Mary’s.

Then there is also the repetition in the church service. You probably have more of that memorized than you realize... “The Lord be with you!” ... “Alleluia! Christ is Risen!”...”Lift up your hearts”... Week in and week out, God works to reclaim our memories for himself through the repetition of his Word in the liturgy of the Divine Service. It reaches its crescendo, its high point, when he greets us here at the table, not as the child but as the risen, ascended, victorious Lord, coming down to have a real, bodily encounter with us, and as he breaks the bread and shares the cup, what is his instruction? “*This is my body, which is given for you. This do...[in remembrance] of me.*” Jesus gives himself to us, body and blood under bread and wine, and in doing that he makes a place for himself in the treasuries of our memories, that we may receive him in our bodies and ponder this mystery in our hearts as the blessed Virgin Mary did.

God kept his word of promise to Mary – “*You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*” God will also keep his word of promise to us. This same Jesus will return again and when he returns he will complete the work of reclaiming and renewing us. Then every aspect of us, our bodies, our minds, and even our memories will be perfected.

What do you think that will be like? Will we completely forget all the bad stuff and only remember the good? We don’t really know but we get a little hint from something Jesus said in John’s Gospel: “*A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me...Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world*”. Jesus seems to suggest here that the suffering we experience in this life will be forgotten in the same way a mother “forgets” the pain of childbearing. It isn’t that she has no recollection of what it was like – but the memory of the pain makes her joy stand out even more by contrast.

Whether this night finds you filled with joy, suffering, or something in between, remember, treasure, and ponder in your heart the good news of Christmas – that this Savior was born to plead for *you* in heaven. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and memories in Christ Jesus. Amen.