

Sermon: Treasured and Pondered

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, Dec. 25, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I can still remember, vividly, the birth of my first born son Justin. Daisy and I were living in Toronto back then, in a little bungalow near the North York city centre. I had really wanted a child, for Daisy not so. We didn't know what it was to be parents. Sure, we took parenting classes, I remember being absolutely terrified of holding even a plastic mock-up baby. We read books, quite a few of them, in anticipating of what was to come. Nothing prepared us really for the actual birth.

Justin came earlier than expected, in an induced birth since he was not growing well inside his mother's womb. He came out underweight—less than 2,000 gram. He was this tiny little thing that I held up in the palm of my hand. I recall the fear, the joy, the excitement of that moment when we held him in our hands, thinking: what have we done! We are now responsible for this tiny little life. I recall the frustration in trying to get him to latch on during breast feeding, trying to wash him in a baby tub...he was just so small.

One thing for certain, the arrival of our first born son changed us, both Daisy and I, irreversibly and completely. The arrival of the only begotten Son of God changed the world also, irreversibly and completely. The four Gospels tell us the same story from four different perspectives.

In Mark, we encounter Jesus the first time, as an adult, when he was being baptized in the river Jordan, by John the Baptizer. In John, we are given a theological description of the 'Word' becoming flesh, of the light shining in this darken world. In Matthew, the fate of the infant Jesus was seemingly controlled by men, an early / step father, or earthly father a wicked king, and three wise men from the east. It is in Luke, we are brought into the stable, beside the manger, and look into Mary's heart as she witnessed the miraculous birth that was sure to change her life.

The passage in Luke 2, places the birth of Jesus in the context of an ominous historical reality, that "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). It places the birth of Jesus in the time while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

This registration should not be confused with a simple census, like the one conducted periodically by Stats Canada. This registration decreed by Augustus was a tax grab, a way by which this powerful Caesar exercised his power, to have a full accounting of his dominion, for the purpose of increasing taxation to further expand the Roman Empire. By this decree, every single person, even the poorest of the poor, would have to travel back to whatever place their family is from and register. It was not just an inconvenience, it was a monumental undertaking for the whole population, just to satisfy a power-hungry man.

This is what brought Joseph and Mary, from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, to a town packed with other travellers, to a house without a spare guest room. In the backdrop of this ominous ‘registration’, Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. The contrast between the power of the emperor and the powerlessness of Mary and Joseph was stark. One might have expected the birth of the Son of God be more pleasant or glorious, but it was not to be.

Mary and Joseph weren’t quite alone. The news of this birth did travel, not far and wide, but to a particular group—shepherds living in the nearby fields—by way of an angel. With the glory of the Lord shining around the terrified shepherds, an angel of the Lord announced to them,

“Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”
(Luke 2:10-11).

As if these shepherds might not comprehend the full significance this announcement, suddenly appearing with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

These shepherds, folks of lowly standing, were amazed and curious. They went as directed, finding the sign for them: a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They then went out and spread the words, the good news, thus becoming the first community of faith.

We are told that “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:18-19). This baby was going to turn her life completely upside down. She may not have known it then, but she was preparing herself for whatever may lay ahead, towards a path that would eventually lead her to stand beside the cross.

My baby Justin was just an ordinary baby, but he certainly reorganized our lives. Daisy was an aspiring artist with a promising future, but she wouldn't paint again for the next ten years, while she devoted herself to the pain and joy of motherhood. I was, back then, on my way to the trading floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, after tasting minor success at both the Montreal and Toronto commodity exchanges. I had to put that dream on hold, as it turned out permanently. Daisy and I both realized that we no longer live for ourselves, but for another human being—the one we created—so we reorganized our lives accordingly, and reorganized again after our second child. It was around the time of the birth of Neo, that I received and responded to the call to ministry. But that's another story for another day. All babies are precious to us parents and we wouldn't trade them for anything else.

At the coming of baby Jesus, we also reorganize our homes and our church during the season of Advent and Christmas. We put up trees and decorations, we wrap and exchange gifts, we gather to worship—during Advent Sundays, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. After New Year, we dutifully put everything back—calling it back to normal.

But what if? What if we also do what Mary did, that is to treasure and ponder all these things in our hearts? What if we let the message of Christmas, of the Christ-Child lingers in our hearts, takes root and grows and strengthens and multiplies and permeates? How might that reorganize your lives?

All babies are blessings from God, especially for their parents. Jesus the Christ-child is also a blessing from God, for all of humanity. For in and through this birth, we are no longer the same. For in and through this birth, the world is no longer the same. It is being transformed by the Messiah, our Lord, our Saviour. Just like the shepherds, we have been given a sign, but the completion of the promise is yet to come.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.