



Pondering This Moment

December 24, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for Christmas Eve

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Merry Christmas! Let me say it again: Merry Christmas!

I want to note that this moment is different, thanks be to God, from the parallel moment last year!

Last year we were together through Zoom, all participating from our homes, in what is quaintly called a “watch party,” where we viewed a beautifully crafted recording of a Christmas Eve service through our Hollywood Square windows.

This year, many of us are gathered here in our treasured, brick and mortar worship space. We note with pleasure the presence of bits of glitter and other detritus on the floor from the Christmas pageant, enthusiastically brought to life here earlier today by masked angels, shepherds, beasts, kings, and of course, Joseph and Mary. *And* we worship with those who are at home, maybe in their ‘jammies with a pleasing beverage nearby!

Our togetherness this year is more complex, though, isn’t it? Most of us probably still wish it were different in some respect. Maybe we are feeling nostalgia or sadness, or frustration or anxiety, as well as gratitude, gladness, and relief that we can gather in person in our brick-and-mortar worship space, *and* that we have the option of worshipping from home. I know that I have all of these feelings. And these feelings are on top of the other feelings many of us bring particularly to Christmas moments—disappointment, regret, sadness, as well as encouragement, contentment, and joy. The moment can be complicated.

Luke is very precise in locating the Christmas moment we ponder together tonight. He begins his narration in global terms, with the Emperor Augustus, in Rome, the center of the universe (at least to Romans) with a decree that all the world should be registered—a census. A specific governor, a specific province, a specific town, a specific family, a specific man, a specific pregnant woman, a specific set of circumstances. And this specific moment ripples forward 2000 years, across 5000 miles, to us, here.

Tonight, we are in a liminal moment, an in-between moment. Literally, liminal means “at the threshold.” The rapidly changing face of the pandemic frames it, but so do the circumstances in our kitchens and living rooms, in our classrooms and workplaces, in world capitals and town halls, in big houses and tin shacks, for the well-housed and for the unhoused, for the deeply rooted and for the refugee, on the front pages of the newspaper and on homepages of websites. The past is gone, and the future is not yet clear. Living in a liminal time is exhausting. And it is also full of promise.

Mary is also living in a liminal moment. In the hushed silence, after the birth, with a moist and likely crying baby on her lap, after the visit of the astonished and boisterously reverent shepherds, the text tells us that she treasured and pondered all these words in her heart. The word “pondered” comes from a Greek verb having a sense of “throwing together or throwing at.” Mary has had so much thrown at her!

Just for starters: a betrothal to an older man, Joseph; an unplanned pregnancy after a holy and terrifying encounter with the angel Gabriel with an invitation from God; a long, uncomfortable trip on the back of



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a donkey to a strange place; labor in a cave without her mother or any women kin around, just animals and a clueless, even if kind, husband; and arrival of the shepherds, with yet another message.

Into the mix of the moment hover these words from the shepherds.

Among them: Do not be afraid. Savior. Peace on Earth. Good News. Great Joy.

How do these words help Mary in this moment when so much has been thrown at her?

Another sense of the word *ponder* is “to bring together in one’s mind, to confer.”

Mary is not solving things. She is not analyzing things. She is not fixing things. She is bringing things together. She is sitting with all that has been thrown at her, bringing it together, in all its complexity, in all its heartache, in all its joy. She sits with God’s promise that God will be *with her*. Do. Not. Be. Afraid.

And so it is with us. So much has been thrown at us, the virus, yes, but also and especially infections of uncertainty, followed by relapses of anxiety, with exhaustion as a primary symptom. The past is gone, the future is unclear.

Yet in this liminal moment, God promises to be Emmanuel, *God with us*, encouraging us, loving us, strengthening us to love others.

Ponder the Good News of *this* liminal moment: Do. Not. Be. Afraid. God. Is. With. Us.

Amen.