

Being the Church at Brentwood

What's Next?

**Psalm 148 and Luke 2:15-21
(141, 145, 139, 171)**

December 30, 2012

It had been a strange and difficult birth for Mary,
filled with angels, anxieties, and awe.

To us, by now, the stories are familiar, perhaps too familiar.
And we've cleaned them up, perhaps too much.

The actual events were a filled
with a bit more grit and grim
than most our nativity scenes and Christmas cards.
There was the shame of a premarital pregnancy,
accompanied with visions of messengers from God.
There was the forced travel to a strange town
during the ninth month of the pregnancy.
There was the rough and reeking stable
with few comforts, even for that day.
There were excited strangers
gathering soon after the birth
insisting on seeing the child.
And finally, more angels and messages
sending the family off to exile in Egypt
to avoid the massacre of the innocents.

No wonder Mary was thinking deeply
about all these things.

Other translations,
such as the New Revised Standard Version,
translate the Greek here as pondering
these things in her heart.
Eugene Peterson's paraphrase talks about Mary
"holding them dear deep within herself."
The New English translation has her
"pondering in her heart what they might mean."

For Jews at the time of Jesus' birth,
The heart was seen as the central bodily organ,
the seat of both emotion and intellect,
feeling and thought.

It was the place deep within where humans considered
what was most important to them.
We often use the word *heart* in a similar way today in English.
We might also use the word *soul*.
Whatever the word, it points to the authentic core of human beings,
the place where and process by which
they make sense and meaning of their lives.

Jesus had entered Mary's life,
bringing excitement, pain, confusion, and hope.
He was destined, Mary had been told,
to fulfill a unique mission –
redeeming the whole of creation
by healing its brokenness and reconciling it to God.
There is much here to ponder
and hold dear deep within.

That is what the Session and I want to invite you to do with us
throughout his coming year of 2013.
We want to encourage this community
that seeks to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
to consider deeply the meaning of Christ's presence in our world.

For the next 52 weeks,
we will be inviting you to join us in memorizing and pondering –
memorizing a short passage from the Scriptures
and thinking about how it guides you to see world differently
and act differently because of that new perspective on the world.

This project started with a suggestion from Winston Rekord
at our Session meeting last May.
“I think we should be doing memory work,” he said.
We were intrigued and pondered that in our hearts.
By the fall, a plan was coming into focus.
That plan was informed by the summer school course
I did at Vancouver School of Theology
with Darrell Guder from Princeton Theological Seminary.
One of the insights from that course
Was that the Scriptures were written to form disciples,
to form followers of Jesus Christ as witnesses in the world
to what God has done for the world in the Christ event.

So, we put refreshing our memories of who God is
and how God is active in the world
together with our calling to be witnesses
and developed the Words Forming Witnesses program for this coming year.

God wants us to know about the divine presence, purpose, and promise.

God is our source of life, our guide to flourishing, and our hope for the future.

God's energy infuses every breath we take
with the reality of being loved and the potential for loving.

God is a constant presence,
available for those who choose to live
in companionship with the divine energy of Jesus Christ
through the work of the Holy Spirit.

God created and sustains us in order to be blessings for the world.

In and through Jesus Christ,
God has given each and every one of us, and all of us together,
the gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
We are invited to use these gifts to work with God in contributing our energy
to the realization of the kingdom of heaven
or the loving reign of God's peace and justice.

God's promise is to be with us always through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the witness of the Scriptures to God's work and ways
among human beings,
we are encouraged to overcome our fears
through knowing and trusting in God's presence with us and for us.

That knowledge comes when we turn our attention
to the varied testimonies to God's nature, purpose, and promise found in the Bible.

This coming year, we will consider together 52 passages from the Bible,
one for each week of the year.

These passages have been prayerfully and carefully chosen
to capture the soul and essence of the Scriptures' witness
to God's nature, purpose, and promise.

When we were doing our year-long series on the Psalms,
back in the first year I was ministering with you,
a phrase in Artur Weiser's commentary on the Psalm 46
stood out so powerfully that I memorized it.

He talked about "the saving knowledge
of having a share in God's kingdom of peace."¹

That's what Biblical knowing is all about –
being a partner with God
in his ongoing work of bringing in the Reign of Shalom
promised in the Scriptures and fulfilled in witness and work of Jesus Christ.

¹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962), p.373.

The deeper our relationship with God in Jesus Christ,
the deeper the Holy Spirit instructs us in the joys of discipleship.

The Session agrees wholeheartedly with Winston
that memorizing in the ways we are suggesting
will deepen our knowledge of our relationship with God
in positive and missional ways.

So, we encourage you to memorize these passages with us.
In that process, you will get to know God better.
As a community, we will get to know God better.

Mull the words over in your mind. Feel them in your heart.
Sense them in your instincts.
Consider what it means to embody them in your life.
Thus, you will come to know more deeply
the reasons God created you to be a blessing in this world.

The first passage, from the first chapter in Genesis,
is in your bulletin this morning -
God's creation of and calling to human beings.
This is the starting point for our understanding of ourselves
as companions of God in his mission to the world.

Memorize the passage as a way of pondering its meaning more deeply.
It will be on our website.
Write comments there about the meaning
you are finding in the passage as you consider it during the week.
Talk about it with friends and family.
Join us for Bible study on alternative Fridays.
Talk about it at lunch after church.
Think of other ways of getting to know God better.

I'm looking forward to our adventure together
in knowing God better in 2013.

*May these thoughts and urgings be used by the Holy Spirit
to form us all for witnessing to the mission of Jesus Christ.*

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church