

Sermon for Sunday, December 11, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"HOW TO DO BUSINESS IN GOD'S BANK"

Text: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."
St. Luke 2:19

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the Bible tells us she replied, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word." (St. Luke 1:38) Had she been able to see into the future, one wonders if she would have answered so readily. Before her lay so many difficult and hard experiences that would tax her to her physical and emotional limits. She could not possibly foresee or imagine the loneliness and pain that would be hers in giving birth to her son in a strange city with only a crude stable and the animals to keep her company. She could not anticipate the sheer terror of their flight into Egypt to escape the sword of Herod, nor the loneliness of dwelling in a far land among strange people. She could not foresee Joseph would die, leaving her a widow with children to care for. Nor could she imagine in her wildest dreams the rise of her eldest son to sudden fame and the equally sudden plummet to disrepute, his quick trial, and his equally quick death. Or how could she have stood it if she could foresee her own agony when she would help to take the broken and bleeding body of Jesus down from his cross where cruel nails had impaled him and where a vicious sword had opened his side. No, it would have been difficult to say "yes" to the angel had she known what the future held. And, in days to come, when the friends of Jesus were to be scattered like fragments of paper before the wind, when they were to be imprisoned, beaten, killed for the sake of her child, could she still have said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord" if she had known?

I suppose most of us would have trouble accepting our future if we could foresee some of the pain, the heartache, it might hold for us. A lot of people are going to fortune tellers, reading horoscopes and other such things to try and find out what the future holds. Frankly, I don't think I want to know. How do you think Job would have felt if he could foresee all of the tragedy that life would heap upon him? It is bad enough to endure trouble when it comes, it would be far worse to live in anticipation and dread of its coming. So our problem is not to know the future, but to be equipped to handle the future when it comes. Wasn't that what Mary needed? She could not imagine the future--she could not foresee what hurt and agony and heartbreak it would bring--but she could and she did do something so that when the future came, she could handle it. You see, Mary learned to do business in God's bank. When trouble came, she could draw on her savings--she could fall back on her reserves. Would you like to know how to have the resources to meet trouble when it comes--to having something to fall back on--to know how to do business in God's bank? That would be a great secret to know, wouldn't it?

First, I would like you to notice what Mary deposited to her account. At the birth of Jesus she could have remembered many things. She could have remembered the pain and physical effort to making the long, 65 mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was already heavy with child. She could have remembered the tearful disappointment of having no room at the inn for her child to be born, and the fright of having her first child alone in a stable. She could have remembered the utter terror that gripped her heart when word came that Herod was putting all male babies to death and they were forced to flee to Egypt.

But when the Bible says, "Mary kept all these things..." those were not the things she kept. No, the Bible means she kept the memory of the shepherds who came, of the wise men from the East who knelt before the manger, or the song of the angels the shepherds told her they heard. She remembered the star that shone so brightly the night her son was born. Yes, those were the things Mary chose to remember.

Psychology teaches us that we are selective in what we choose to keep stored away in the recesses of the mind. And the bad memories we have stored away in our subconscious or unconscious minds often govern our actions and reactions to life. Often, when these bad things that are hidden away begin to work on us, psychosis or mental breakdown can occur. We may not be consciously aware of the source of our anxiety, but just the same, from the dark recesses of our unconscious minds, those stored experiences are sending out their dreadful poison, destroying our mental health. Part of psychotherapy is to discover those dreadful memories that are destroying us from within so that we can bring them to the conscious mind in order to deal with them. In effect, we have made a deposit in the devil's bank, and now our interest payment comes.

So, each of us is consciously or unconsciously storing away certain experiences in our hearts. But the Bible says that Mary chose consciously and deliberately to store up the good things, the happy things. She chose to remember the best of what life had brought her that night. In the years that followed--years which brought hurt and agony and mental anguish--she had those deep reserves of the heart from which to draw.

What kind of deposits are you making in your heart this morning? Are they the kind of resources that will sustain you when life does its worst? All of us know people who are soured on life, embittered against the world. Some bad incident, some unhappy experience, has been harbored in the heart until all of life has become poisoned and bitter. They have made the wrong kinds of deposits and their resources have failed. Not so Mary. She remembered the good, the best, the blessed things.

The second thing I would have you notice is this: Mary went over her deposit slips regularly. The Bible says that Mary not only kept these things, she pondered over them. Now, the Greek word translated "ponder" means literally "to confer with one's self", to think about. This means quite simply that Mary consciously and deliberately dwelt on the good things that had happened to her life.

Now, the fact is, all of us do a certain amount of pondering. If you have ever had an argument with someone just before going to bed, you know what I mean! Most of us have spent some sleepless hours going over and over in our minds some bad incident, thinking too late of what we should have said or done. Have you done that? Have you laid awake, literally gnashing your teeth in frustration as you relive some situation, fantasizing what you wish you had said or done?

Mary didn't do that. She pondered the good things. I'm sure we both know people who have nursed some grudge, dwelt on some slight, remembered some unhappy experience until it has soured their lives. They not only remember the bad, they are always looking for some more bad to happen. And when it doesn't, sometime they invent it in their minds. It is sort of like the hypochondriac who always thinks he is ill. Then, because he wants everyone to realize how right he was, he puts on his tombstone, "I told you I was sick." What are you pondering? Is it the thing your husband didn't do or say? Is it something your wife failed to do or did poorly? Or are you pondering the thoughtful little deeds, the kind acts, the loving gesture? What are you remembering about your children? Is it a snuggling in the lap with an, "I love you," or is it the vase he broke, the pants he tore, or the garbage he forgot? Yes, what are you pondering?

In her darkest hour, Mary had precious memories, precious moments that she could draw upon. When life was at its worst, she had a storehouse of life at its best from which she could steady her faith and her confidence in the goodness of God. She could say, "Though this makes no sense to me now and though my heart is breaking at this moment, I can remember those things in the past when God proved true and trustworthy and I know I can trust him now."

So first, Mary was selective in what she kept; second, she pondered on them; and then third, Mary deposited them in God's bank, her heart. The Bible says, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Have you ever had someone say to you, "I want to speak to you straight from my heart?" or, "This comes from the bottom of my heart?" or, "This just breaks my heart?" What are they saying--what do they mean? Does it not mean that this thing--whatever it is--is somehow involved with and wrapped up in the very core of their being?

What is at the core of your being this morning? When God gave the law to the children of Israel he said, "And these things shall be in thine heart." (Deut.6:6) And the Bible says, "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." (I Sam. 16:7) And does that mean that the things in our heart--the things at the core of our souls--are the things that ultimately determine who and what we are? Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "As a man thinks in his heart, so he is." He said, "Where a man's treasure is, there is his heart also." You see, it isn't enough that we remember the good things, that we ponder them, but we must also put them in our hearts, to let them be the determining factors in who and what we are--they must rule and control the kinds of persons we become.

What is in your heart this morning? What deposits have you made and what sort of dividends will they pay? Let me share with you a story about Catherine Marshall. After her husband died, she wrote a book entitled, "A Man Called Peter." As a widow, with a son named Peter John after his father, Catherine Marshall some years later married a widower named Len LeSourd who had three small children. One Christmas they spent with Catherine's parents who were elderly. Before opening their presents around the Christmas tree, they decided that each would think of some gift he would give Jesus that day. Chester, who was seven, said shyly that he would like to give Jesus the gift of not losing his temper anymore. Jeffrey, age four, had been slow in night training and was delightfully specific, "I'll give him my diapers." Winifred said she would give Jesus better grades in school, and Len LeSourd said he wanted to be a better father, which meant a gift of more patience. Peter John said he wanted to give Jesus a more dedicated life. Catherine was to remember that statement five years later when Peter John was ordained into the Presbyterian ministry. Then it was her father's turn, "I certainly don't want to inject too solemn a note into this," he said, "but somehow I know that this is the last Christmas I'll be sitting in this room with my family gathered around me like this. I've had a most wonderful life. Long ago I gave my life to Christ. I've failed him often, but he has blessed me--especially with my family. I want to say this while you are all here. I may not have another chance. Even after I go on into the next life, I'll still be with you. And, of course, I'll be waiting for each one of you there." Catherine writes, "There was love in his brown eyes--and tears in ours. Time seemed to stand still in the quiet room...the fragrance of balsam and cedar was in the air. The old windowpanes reflected back the red glow of the Christmas lights." Then she writes, "Four months later Father did leave this world. Every time I think of Father now, I can see that scene in the living room--like a jewel of a moment set in the ordinary moments that make up our days. For that brief time real values came clearly into focus: Father's gratitude for life; Mother's strong faith; my husband's quiet strength; my son's inner yearning momentarily shining through blurred youthful ambitions; the eager faces of the children groping toward understanding the truth; the reality of the love of God as our thoughts focused on Him whose birth we were commemorating." And then Catherine Marshall added, "It was my most memorable Christmas." Yes, she remembered because, like Mary, she kept the good things, she pondered over them, and she did business in God's bank--she kept them in her heart.