

Sermon for Sunday, December 27, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor
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"WHEN THE NEEDLES FALL OFF THE CHRISTMAS TREE"

St. Luke 2:1-20

Text: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." St. Luke 2:19,20

By now our Christmas trees are pretty well dried out and the needles are falling off. When we begin to take the ornaments off and take the tree out, we will leave a trail of needles across the carpet and somebody will have to get the vacuum cleaner out. So here it is the first Sunday after Christmas and most of us have already put the season behind us and are looking forward to the coming of the new year. Has Christmas made any difference in our lives? Is it back to "business as usual"?

That first Christmas made a profound difference in the lives of a lot of people. They came away from Christmas with something rather permanent and lasting. Perhaps it would be useful to us to look at some of the things that came out of Christmas that had a lasting impact. It may very well be that we can discover something of lasting importance to us, even when the needles have fallen off the Christmas tree.

Look first at Mary. The Bible says that after Christmas was over she "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart". Have you ever wondered what part of Christmas Mary kept? There were a lot of things about that first Christmas that were not very pleasant. She went through great agony and uncertainty not knowing what Joseph would do or how he would react to the fact that she was pregnant. And that long, hard journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem must have been very difficult for her since she was so far along in her pregnancy. On top of that, when they got to their destination, there was no place for them to stay. By then her labor pains had likely started and they ended up in a crude stable. Was there anyone there to help her? Was there some kind mid-wife or some trained professional to help her with the delivery? If so, the Bible is silent about it. So there were indeed a lot of unpleasant things that happened to Mary that first Christmas.

Do you think those are the things that Mary remembered? No--I don't think so at all. Where do you think Luke got his information about the birth of Jesus? Most scholars agree that he probably got it first-hand from Mary herself. But do we find any long description of her troubles and hardships? Not at all. Instead we catch the wonder of a brightly shining star--the story of the angels and the shepherds--the incredible visit of the wise men. You see, those were the things Mary remembered.

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 in our unconscious minds often govern our actions in life. In many cases, where there is emotional illness, we discover that the cause is some bad, some unhappy memory hidden away in the heart. We may not always be consciously aware of the source of our anxiety, but from the dark recesses of our unconscious minds, those stored experiences are sending their dreadful poison into our lives and affecting our actions.

So each of us is consciously or unconsciously storing away certain experiences, certain memories in our hearts. So often in marriage counseling one of the things we have to do before a marriage can be put back together is to do something about those bad memories that two persons have stored up. Frequently a couple simply cannot begin a new relationship until something is done about those old wounds, those old memories, that get in the way of a new beginning.

How about you? What sort of memories do you have stored up in your heart? I suspect most of us this morning know persons who are soured on life and bitter against the world. They are persons who remember only the bad, only the unhappy, and they have harbored it in their hearts until all of life has become bitter and poisoned.

What kind of memories do you have? I would imagine that most of us have some bad memories, some unhappy things in our hearts that we need to get rid of this morning. We need for God to heal our memories and help us get rid of those memories that sour us on life and cause us to distrust one another.

So, when the needles fall off the Christmas tree, we need to keep only those things that are worthy of remembering--to keep those things that are true and noble and good. Isn't that what Mary did? I think she deliberately decided not to remember the bad parts. She deliberately chose to remember only the good things, the exciting things, the worthwhile things. Do you remember what the Bible says about that? It says, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Phil. 4:8)

So when the needles fall off the Christmas tree, by an act of our wills, by a conscious decision, we need to select what we will store in our hearts. Mary chose the good things--what are you storing in your heart?

But there was a second thing that Mary did. The Bible says that she pondered those things she stored in her heart. Do you ever ponder? To ponder means to bring to the front of the mind, to bring to conscious awareness. Well, I certainly do. When something has gone wrong in my life or when I feel I have been treated unfairly, I do an awful lot of pondering. Too often I do my pondering after I've gone to bed. I'll think about how badly I've been treated--I'll lie there and grind my teeth over something someone has done to me. I'll carry on imaginary conversations with the person who has injured me and naturally I win all of the arguments. That's the time I can think of all the sarcastic replies, all of the clever answers, all of the cutting things to say that I wish I had said. Do you do that? And the next thing you know, our hearts are pounding, our blood pressure is rising, and we are totally incapable of sleep.

Well, I suspect most of us do that kind of pondering. But that isn't what Mary did. When the Bible said, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them", the Greek form of the verb for ponder was the imperfect form. Now the Greeks in their language had a great ability to express thoughts by verb forms that we can't do in English and the imperfect verb form used here is that she pondered and kept on doing it. It was a habitual activity to bring to the front of her mind, to deliberately think about these things--it was a habit.

Now I called to your attention when I was reading the Bible scripture earlier and I said the people wondered. The Greek verb form for wondered is the aorist. That means they wondered and then they quit wondering and went on about their business. But when they say Mary pondered it is the imperfect form which means she did it and kept on doing it--pondering on the good things. Do you need to start doing that? I know I do. We need to start deliberately thinking about the good things our mate does, the accomplishments our children do achieve. We need to think about the thoughtful little deeds, the kind acts, the loving gestures.

Mary had some dark times ahead of her. By implication, Joseph was dead by the time Jesus reached manhood. She was to see her son rejected and despised, and one terrible day she was to stand at the foot of a Roman cross and watch her son be executed. Well, how do you keep your balance when the world is going to pieces about you? How do you keep your emotional stability when the roof is falling in? Mary could keep her balance because she had something to stand on. She had precious memories she could hold on to to steady her faith and renew her confidence in the goodness of God. She could say something like this, "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."

That's what I need in life, don't you? I need some memories of times when things went right, when out of the worst, God brought the best. Then, when life's storms are pelting me, I can stand fast because I know I can trust God. Yes, when the needles fall off the Christmas tree, I still have something to hold on to--something to stand on.

But there was someone else for whom Christmas had a lasting impact. It was the shepherds. I sometimes wish I knew more about those shepherds. What was their relationship to God before Christmas? Were they close to God--was that why the angels came to them? But we don't know. And what happened to them afterwards? Did it change their lives? Did they know about Jesus after he grew up and did they realize it was the baby they had seen that night? Did any of them become Christians--followers of Jesus? Well, we don't know the answer to any of those questions either.

However, there is one thing we do know. We know that what happened to them on Christmas changed their lives. Even though the needles fell off the Christmas tree, they were never the same again. And do you know why they were never the same? For the simple reason that they went back to their sheep glorifying and praising God. Now, let me tell you something about that passage of scripture. In the Greek, the force of the verb forms means that they not only glorified and praised God, but they kept on doing it. There is really no good way to translate into English the Greek. However, it means they did something and kept on doing it.

Well, have you had a religious experience? Most of us have at one time or another. There have been times in the lives of most of us when we have been close to God or felt His presence in a special way. But has that experience made a lasting change, a permanent altering of our lives? As a pastor it is interesting to observe what happens to people after they have an experience of God. For some, they soon fall back into their old ways, their old life-style. However, for others, they begin to grow and develop and mature as Christians.

What makes the difference? It is simple enough. Those who begin to glorify and praise God are the ones who grow. Those who don't soon lose what they had.

Isn't that true in your life? The more you worship, the more you study the Bible, the more you praise God from day to day. The more you remember what God has done for you the more you keep on growing and maturing as a Christian. But if you don't do those things, soon you lose what you do have.

Well, Christmas has come and gone again and the needles are falling off the Christmas tree. Is there anything permanent and abiding we can take from Christmas? We can have a permanent Christmas present if we keep the good things of life and think about those things, pondering on them in our hearts. And we can keep on growing and maturing if, like the shepherds, we keep on glorifying and praising God.

You see, when you do that you will have Christmas every day.