

Mary's Ponderings

Luke 2:41-52 by Patty Friesen (Dec. 30/18)

I've always enjoyed this gospel story of Mary and Joseph losing 12-year-old Jesus. Luke is the only gospel to include this childhood story. Mary and Joseph took off from Jerusalem assuming he was with other people. Mary and Joseph were obviously *not* helicopter parents. They went a whole day's journey before they looked for him among relatives and friends and not finding him, returned another day's journey back to Jerusalem and then looked for him for three days in Jerusalem for a total of *five* days that Jesus was separated from his parents. And there he was the whole time, discussing scripture with the rabbis in the temple. Apparently the rabbis didn't think it was strange for a 12-year-old to be on their own for five days either. It was a different time.

The point of the story is that first of all, both Mary and Joseph are devout Jews, both observing the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover even though it was only required of Jewish men. At age 13, Jesus would be considered a man and welcomed into the religious community by his choice. Today it is called being bar mitzvah if you are a male and bat mitzvah if you are a female. At age 12, Jesus is still technically considered under his parents' spiritual responsibility yet he had the intellectual and spiritual caliber to discuss scripture with learned teachers.

Mary has voice in this text and scolds Jesus,, "Why have you treated us like this? Your *father and* I have been looking for you." Jesus responds Didn't you know I must be in *my Father's* house? Mary doesn't think the play on the word *father* is funny but it sets the stage for who Jesus really is. That had to be hurtful for Mary and Joseph who

didn't understand what Jesus was talking about but Mary pondered all these confusing things in her heart.

Mary is a model of strong discipleship. Mary has voice and choice throughout this whole ordeal with birthing and parenting. She is a disciple, actively following adult Jesus in his work. But Mary's character today reveals her most important spiritual ability, which is to take things she doesn't understand and ponder their meaning in her heart. She is in the same open prayerful pose that she was at the annunciation - receiving information that she doesn't understand yet remaining open to God's movement in it. God's involvement with her is a treasure that she savours, ponders and cherishes. She may not be sure what it means but she waits with it, holding it until the mystery eventually reveals itself.

Mary's pondering shows us that Christ's arrival doesn't mean everything is answered but Jesus will continue to confuse and challenge and surprise us. Christ's birth isn't the end but the beginning of a search for understanding of God's ways, which leads us all to pondering and bended knee in adoration and praise. To be a Christian does not mean having all the answers but means being a seeker and a ponderer like Mary, observing the events around us and asking the questions: What is God doing for me and for the world? To believe it is not merely intellectual assent to it but to believe, is to let it settle deep into our bones and form the structure and habits of our life. To believe something is to let it transform our life.

How does God want to speak to us these days and how can we position ourselves with openness like Mary to ponder it? At the year's end, we naturally reflect back on the year. 2018 was a doozy. In our families, we have experienced the

challenges of strokes, congestive heart failure, suicide, breast cancer, Parkinsons' and conflict. We've weathered these health storms with courage and resiliency. How has God been present to us in all these life difficulties?

In our congregation, we celebrated our 90th year with good music, good food and good fun. We brought the AlNouris to Saskatoon in April, met our budget, celebrated baptism and are celebrating our first pastoral pregnancy. We've just finished our congregational reviews and renewed our commitment to our children and youth and intergenerational ministry. We've said we want to engage our community more and at council we are poised to ramp up our web-site, live-streaming our services and inclusion statements. We have great energy among our young families and great experience among our elders to lead us into our 91st year. How has God been present to us in all these congregational events?

2018 was a doozy in our world with the courageous #MeToo Movement, women coming forward and speaking out about sexual violence of famous successful men like Bill Cosby and US Supreme Court Justice Brent Kavanaugh. Some of these cases went to trial, others ignored. There is still much work to be done in this awareness of abuse of power. Our world is also finally facing the effects of climate change in wildfires, melting glaciers and in our own local climate of drought and hail storms. How is God present to us in these events?

As doers, We Mennonites may be more inclined to action and less inclined to ponder, less inclined to sit and meditate and journal our dreams and less inclined to practice silent centering prayer at the beginning of the day or examining prayer at the end of the day. I invite us these next weeks of our winter study of spiritual practices to

dig into a season of pondering and prayer. It may be as simple as lighting candles while we drink our coffee these dark mornings, or a quiet evening ritual of going through the day with thankfulness and release after a bed-time story. These pondering practices are a discipline to stop our doing, breathe deeply and listen to God's still voice.

This is someone's experience of silent centering prayer, spending twenty minutes in complete silence. "First, I fidget, I cross and uncross my legs, fold and unfold my hands, bow and raise my head, breathe and try not to think about the aching muscles I didn't know I had in my neck and shoulders. My mind drifts. I'm supposed to endure 20 minutes of this quiet prayer? "God's first language is silence," writes St. John of the Cross. In order to understand this language, we must learn to be silent and rest in God. I've been praying all my life, talking at God about everything I need and trying to follow prayerbooks to help guide me but fumbling my way into silent contemplative prayer has created a deeper, more listening, more calm space in my soul than wordy prayers.

Silent prayer asks me to believe that God's work has little to do with me. Silent prayer takes Bible verses like "Go into your closet and pray in secret and "My life hidden with Christ in God to a truly mystical level. In silence, my spirit somehow communes with God's. Contemplative prayer has prompted me to surrender a controllable God for a wilder, more magnificent one. During those fleeting seconds when distraction falls away and I can truly rest in silent prayer, the divine presence I perceive is one I can't possibly describe with words. The God whose first language is silence is vast. I never have to find such a God; he simply is. I'll never find words to hold such a God; she holds me. I can't earn this God's love; love is the ground I stand on. In truth, this God

always is, always holds and always loves. But silence allows me to abide for a little while in that exquisite always.” (Debi Thomas, *the Christian Century*, Nov. 21, 2018.)

To deepen our prayer life we may need to engage our *bodies* in prayer as well as our spirits. These dark mornings when I’m tempted to depression and grouchiness, I’ve begun practicing You-Tube yoga. I roll out my mat in the middle of the living room floor and get down and stretch with Adrienne who is a little too perky and skinny for my liking but I’m finding as I purposefully breathe in and out and push my tight shoulders and legs a little further, I’ve created a bit of more openness and flexibility in my body but hopefully in my mind and soul as well.

Another physical way of praying is walking and I pray for Osler when I walk around town during my lunch breaks. Walking clears the head and creates space for insight and compassion. Another way of physical praying is with a labyrinth. Early Christian pilgrims who couldn’t walk to Jerusalem to pay homage to Jesus, created walking paths in their churches called labyrinths. A labyrinth is a journey of winding and wending paths that lead from the outside world to a quiet centre for meditation and then lead a person back out into the world. It is different than a maze that has paths that lead to no end and whose purpose is to confuse. The labyrinth has a clear direction inward and upward to God and is a powerful tool for reflection and meditation and engaging the body in prayer, whether by feet or finger. I have copies of paper labyrinths for us today on the lobby table that we can trace with our fingers. I invite us to use Robin Neudorf’s amazing outdoor labyrinth in her garden in spring, a path of stones imprinted with the leaves of plants and sayings to guide one’s thoughts as one winds around and in and out, following a path to a chair under an oak tree in the middle.

On the lobby table, I have patterns to knit prayer shawls that we deacons give to people who are sick or caring for others to wrap up in warmth and feel God's love. We also pray as we cook for others. Mennonite Church Saskatchewan recognizes that we Mennonites need to stretch our souls with some prayer to figure out what God is trying to say to us this year. We are in the midst of deep change in the institutional church and we can no longer do denominational church as we used to. A Spirituality Resource Team has formed which goes to churches to help preach and teach about ways to enrich our prayer life. This team will come January 20 for our winter study worship service, 11:15 Sunday School, potluck and 12:45 wrap-up on helpful ways to ponder and listen to God's movement in our lives.

Let us pray...God who invites us into silence and pondering, move in the depths of our souls and understanding of your ways in the world and in our lives over this past year and into the next. We trust in you even if we don't understand and we thank you for Jesus who shows us the way. Amen.