

Preparing for Christmas services at Trinity Lime Rock is always a big job. And one would think that this year, in the middle of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic when in-person services have had to be suspended, that things would be easier – but this Christmas has its own special challenges. And its own disappointments, because I had hoped, and I know many of you hoped, that we'd be back in the church by now. But it's just not safe at this time. We have to yet more patience.

A few days ago I had a real blessing, it was the pleasure of having conversations with 13 of you on zoom. Not 13 people all together on one zoom call, but 13 individual zoom meetings. I was recording all the readers for all the services to be held between now and January 3rd. I haven't had conversations with so many people without masks on for many, many months. I got to catch up with quite a number of parishioners. If you didn't get a chance to read with me and would like to, please be sure to sign up with Geoff for the services in the coming months.

And here I have to put in a plug for Geoff Brown who has been putting together our rotation of readers, servers, deposit counters, intercessors, etc. for years now. By my count it has been 10 years. So, when Geoff writes to you about your participation in the life of the church please respond to him as soon as you can, to make his job a little easier. And if you would like to be a reader or intercessor but Geoff doesn't know that, please take the initiative to write to him. OK. So, that's my advertisement for the week.

On to my thoughts about the Gospel reading for this Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent. Primarily I want to speak of Mary, the mother of our Lord. Mary's faithfulness, willingness to be a servant of God and her humility are what make Mary a unique and special person in the Gospels. We can feel how perplexed she must have been on hearing the announcement of her pregnancy from the angel Gabriel.

But how many of us, if encountering an angel would have the presence of mind to **ponder** what the angel is saying? Would we brush off the messenger of God thinking that we must be having a mental breakdown? Hearing voices in our head? Would we laugh like Sarah laughed when the angel told her and her husband Abraham in the Book of Genesis that they were going to have a baby? Would we have the presence of mind, when hearing an internal or external ethereal voice, to be still and listen? To pray, to ask questions, "How can this be," Mary asked?

There are a number of times in Luke's Gospel when Mary ponders, or wonders, or stops to consider what the meaning of an event might be. Luke will later say about Mary, when the shepherds come to see the newly born Babe in the manger, that she took time then to ponder all these things in her heart. When Jesus was finally found in Jerusalem as a teenager Mary again purposefully thinks about

the events that have taken place and their importance in the life of her child, in her own life, and maybe reflects for all of us who Jesus will be in his life and death, and resurrection.

Would that we too would spend more time pondering the things that are going on around us in a careful, meaningful way.

Today is traditionally our pageant Sunday and thanks to the Frost family we have pictures of their Nativity tableau to show you. And Christine also had a great idea for this Sunday. Many of us own a creche, otherwise call a Nativity Scene in our homes. Of course we have the lovely Nativity here at Trinity which is so beautifully carved from wood and is always part of our traditional celebration of the season.

This year, Christine suggested and I've asked you all to send me photographs of your creches from your homes, or perhaps one that is on the Green in your town. So, Christine is incorporating all our Nativity scenes into the video for this week. This is a great way to keep our traditions alive despite our inability to gather in person on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

All of these photographs that you've sent have made me take a new look at what some people might consider just a dusty old tchotchke typical of the season. I look at these nativity scenes made out of so many different materials, wood, plaster, corn cobs, clay or plastic and see what the artist might have been trying to capture in the little figurines. Joseph is usually standing above the manger in a protective way. Mary is sometimes standing, sometimes kneeling next to her baby. She is portrayed as adoring the Holy Child, in awe of the miracle of Life, and perhaps you can see on her face that she is pondering many things in her heart.

One Nativity photo that you have seen, or will see in the video this morning is of a Nativity scene that I photographed at the CVS in Millerton. I was walking along the Christmas aisle and I spotted it right there between a jolly snowman and a stern looking nutcracker. This Mary, Joseph and the little babe seemed out of place to me on that shelf with other Christmastime statuary.

I sent the picture to my kids and wondered with them why the holy, religious image was sandwiched between these other lesser figures (in my estimation.) I found it jarring. But one of my sons wrote back and said, well, mom, where should it be found if not at CVS? Should Jesus only be available at a religious store, safely tucked away. Why not have baby Jesus on a bare metal shelf with jingle bells blaring on the store sound system? OK....

So, I pondered that in my heart. And I realized that he was right. It may look odd to me, but each of us can choose off the shelf the images that mean the most to us for Christmas. Why shouldn't people find a nativity scene for sale at a pharmacy? It's sort of like what we experience at a bookstore (if you go to bookstores still.) There are books about every sort of topic. There are Bibles found there as well as books that some may consider sacrilegious. We have the freedom to choose what means most to us. And that's a very good thing.

What will you encounter today that will make you ponder all these things in your heart. Mary shows us the way on this Sunday late in Advent. Let us each affirm, as Mary did so many years ago, “Let it be with me according to your word.”