

## *Treasure*

Rev. Martha ter Kuile

Minister of Worship, Pastoral Care and Faith Development

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### *Reading: Luke 2.1-20*

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her

heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

The other night, on Thursday, I dropped in to the choir practice to cheer them on and pass along some complimentary comments from the congregation. To my surprise, I found the choir members in the midst of a theological discussion. They were considering the arms of Mary, and trying to determine what they were like. You will see from an anthem later in the service that the writer has described Mary's arms as 'white'. Of course all over the world, people think of the holy family as looking just like us, whoever we are – there are wonderful paintings and sculptures of Mary as a black woman, or a Chinese woman, or First Nations, or blond and blue-eyed. It seems common to imagine her in many ways – but surely it is unlikely that her arms would have been white. So the choir decided to substitute a different word. But what would it be?

You can see that the problem of the arms of Mary is theological – it poses the question of what happens when God experiences the world? At Christmas, our faith says that God comes to be with humanity, in the most intimate way. It is the central claim of Christian faith. That God is incarnate, that God is with us, Emmanuel. So the question of Mary's arms asks, what is God's first physical knowledge of human life? What is God's experience here? In our religious lexicon, the baby Jesus is God in human embrace, in Mary's embrace. Do we think she would have *soft* arms? Because surely she would have held her baby close, and held him tenderly. And such a young woman, a girl really, her arms would be soft to the touch.

But what about *strong* arms? A village girl, accustomed to hard work, carrying water, and fuel, maybe field work. Just imagine the type of arms you have if you wash all the clothes by hand – she probably prepared the swaddling bands herself. And there are other kinds of strength – we know from the later stories what a strong mother she was going to become, how she would suffer later.

What about *warm* arms? Yes, certainly. Or *sweet* arms. Or *tired* arms, depending upon which part of the story you were thinking of. The theological reflection on Thursday was slightly limited by the need for a word to fit the music – it has to be one

syllable. It couldn't be *lovely* arms, or *loving* arms, or *protective* arms, or *enthusiastic* arms.

The choices illustrate our sense of Mary. The story we read each Christmas doesn't really corroborate the conventional picture of her as demure and retiring. A demure and retiring girl couldn't have done the things she did. Imagine arguing with an angel – "*how can this be?*" she said, when Gabriel told her she would bear a son.

And then, when satisfied with the answer, she stepped up, into the language and role of the great prophets of Israel. *Here I am, Lord*, she said, and took her place with Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Samuel and Isaiah. She walked a hundred miles to see her cousin, she sang her song of justice and rejoicing, and she walked again or rode a donkey, this time with her husband to the city of David. And why, one asks, did she not stay home with her mother and have the baby in the traditional way? The women didn't have to be counted in that census, she didn't have to go to Bethlehem – but you can imagine her saying to Joseph, *I'm coming with you*. There is a feistiness about this girl. She seems always to be game for an adventure. One can imagine that she might have thought that camping in the stable was kind of interesting. Here, look, she says, we can use the manger.

And then the extraordinary adventure of childbirth, and the bright sky, and the shepherds' visits. And the words they said. Like many mothers, she was so excited she couldn't sleep. So much to think over, so much to remember, to experience for the first time. *She treasured all these words, pondered them in her heart*. So much to treasure. In the words of the poet Sylvia Plath,

Who is he, this furious boy,  
shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?  
He is looking so angrily!  
He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.  
The blue colour pales. He is human after all.  
...  
What did my fingers do, before they held him?  
What did my heart do, with its love?  
I have never seen a thing so clear.  
His lids are like the lilac-flower  
And soft as a moth, his breath.  
I shall not let go.  
There is no guile or warp or in him. May he keep so.  
(from *Three Women*)

Were Mary's arms soft or strong or tender or fierce? Soft and strong, tender and fierce. And tired and loving and protective and warm. On Christmas Eve, when we come together to the table, remembering him, to celebrate the mystery of God with us, we too carry that treasure in our arms. The treasure of God's relentless desire to be here on earth, to be with us. When we hold the presence of God, do we hold with gentleness or with strength, with tenderness or vitality? However we hold that treasure, let us say this: I shall not let go. There is no guile or warp or in this.

May we keep so. Amen.