

The Life of Mary, Part 4: Don't neglect to reflect. Luke 2:8-52.

Author Randy Reese shares a story in one of his books. He says: In 1905 the Grand Trunk Railroad was beginning to wend its way through southeastern Saskatchewan. Along the newly laid tracks, one particular community was given the name Ituna; today it has a population of around seven hundred. Now why on earth would you name a town that? Glad you asked. As the story goes, Ituna got its name because the letter "I" was next in the alphabet—the last few communities had already been named Fenwood, Goodeve and Hubbard. It is also believed that Ituna got its name from Rudyard Kipling's story "Puck of Pook's Hill." In that story, Kipling tells of a wall built by the Romans to keep out the Scots. The wall spanned what is now the English countryside from a point on the east coast to the town of Ituna on the west, and that wall still exists today. So the hardworking and rugged Itunians in Canada appreciate the unique history of their town's name. And the railroad brought with it opportunity for Ukrainian settlers to clear the land with the hope of someday making a livelihood from their new farms. Purchase of the land was made official when the settlers could put up a building or two within three years and come up with the \$10 to pay for their 160 acres.

Many of those early farms remain in the same families that had the courage and fortitude to settle the land all those years ago. These are people that pride themselves on working hard, taking care of the land, and living simply. All this may sound admirable, but a visit to the local coffee shop and some discreet eavesdropping revealed fatigue with the misfortunes of agriculture and some dreaming of what life and farming would be like if "only luck would come our way." More recently, on some of the same family farms in the Ituna area, mining companies were given permission to do exploratory testing for various types of underground mineral deposits. These mining prospectors soon became the brunt of much coffee shop banter, conversations which were mainly a mixture of disbelief and offense that someone from outside Ituna could tell them something new about their land. However, these conversations soon took on a different character when, to the utter shock of the farmers, the mining prospectors discovered diamonds on their properties.

There are seasons in our Christian lives when, like those Ituna farmers, we might find ourselves wondering, Is this as good as it gets? Is this all there is to the Christian life? I'm saved, and that's awesome and all, but now what? I just try to attend church and behave? Or is there something more to it, something deeper, that I'm missing? In Ephesians 2 the apostle Paul addresses this.

Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

Eph 2:9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Paul was telling the Ephesians that God gave them a glorious salvation, a chance for a life free from the chains of sin. That's a great thing, but God didn't stop there. He had already deposited something more under the surface of their lives, like the diamonds under the fields by Ituna: a promise of being uniquely designed by God to participate in the work he does. That's exactly what Jesus did while he was on earth- participated in the work of God.

John 5:19 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

John 20:21a Jesus said "...As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

So, if we want to understand what it is God has prepared for us to do, look at what He's doing, and imitate him, like Jesus did. So it leaves us asking the question- what is God up to? What is he doing around us and in us? How do we get on board? Mary was asking this same question. As we saw when we studied her Magnificat, she was already making connections between God's work and the events of her own life. Today, we will see how she continued to do this.

What she Treasured up/Pondered

First, let's glance at the things Mary had to process- and it's a lot. To start with, there's the strange and miraculous things that happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth, then the birth of John and the angel Gabriel's declaration about him, then John jumping and Elizabeth's blessing on Mary. Then of course there's Gabriel's message to Mary herself about Jesus. The angel had called Jesus Great, the Son of the Highest; but he was as vulnerable as any other baby. He was to sit upon the throne of David; yet He was cradled in a manger. Then there's the way God made the birth of Jesus coincide with the census, so Jesus could be born in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy, even though it made life more difficult for Mary and Joseph, then to top it off there's shepherds showing up because they say angels told them about it, but aside from them the angels didn't tell anyone else in Israel. So what is God up to? It's a lot for Mary to try to understand, but there's even more. Let's pick up in Luke 2:8 and read to the end of the chapter.

Luk 2:8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luk 2:9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

Luk 2:10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Luk 2:11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Luk 2:12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Luk 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

Luk 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Luk 2:15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

Luk 2:16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

Luk 2:17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

Luk 2:18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Luk 2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Luk 2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luk 2:21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luk 2:22 And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

Luk 2:23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord")

Luk 2:24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

Luk 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luk 2:26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Luk 2:27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,

Luk 2:28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

Luk 2:29 "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;

Luk 2:30 for my eyes have seen your salvation

Luk 2:31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

Luk 2:32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Luk 2:33 And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.

Luk 2:34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed

Luk 2:35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Luk 2:36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,

Luk 2:37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.

Luk 2:38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luk 2:39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

Luk 2:40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Luk 2:41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

Luk 2:42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom.

Luk 2:43 And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it,

Luk 2:44 but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances,

Luk 2:45 and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.

Luk 2:46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Luk 2:47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Luk 2:48 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."

Luk 2:49 And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Luk 2:50 And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them.

Luk 2:51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

Luk 2:52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Mary has a whole series of things here to process. But some of them are full of irony and contradiction. For example, Mary was “highly favored” as his birth mother; yet a sword should pierce through her own soul. And her 12 year old is giving the best and brightest in Israel a run for their money so to speak. How is she supposed to figure out what to make of all this?

How she treasured/pondered

There are actually three key Greek words that tell us how Mary processed everything that happened. In Luke 2:19 “But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” The word that is translated as “treasured up” is *suntereo*. It would be literally translated as “kept on keeping together”. The prefix *sun* means with or within. Its root is the verb *τηρέω*, which signifies keeping something by guarding it closely. It’s the imperfect tense- it indicates continual action. It is used often in the NT to refer to keeping the commands of Christ. So the compound verb is even more expressive. It shows that she was compiling a collection of events and messages. She didn’t want to forget any of it so she could put it together with other things that might happen.

The next word Luke uses strengthens that same idea. The word translated as “pondering” is *sumballo*, which means to put things together to be weighed and compared. Every circumstance relative to her son’s birth, Mary treasured up in her memory; and every new circumstance she weighed, or compared with those which had already taken place. Other modern words that have meanings that overlap it would be processing, reflecting, or meditating.

Luke goes on to tell us the things Mary would have added to her list of things to ponder. The third word comes at the end of this next list, to sum up the way Mary processed everything as a whole. In Luke 2:51, the word translated as “treasured up” here is a slightly different Greek word, *diatereo*. It would be literally translated as “thoroughly, persistently kept together”. It’s the same root, *tereo*, that is imperfect tense, indicating continual action of keeping and guarding. But the prefix *dia* indicates that her collection was complete because she has added to it the things that happened during Jesus’ childhood, and now she’s pondering them together as a whole, in order to find all the insight she could about what God was up to in the world, about her son’s identity and mission, about how God was working in her own life, anxious to see how it would all unfold. Her insights affected the way she conducted herself later on. We’ll look at that next time.

But today I want to focus on how Mary treasured and pondered these things. When we connect these Greek words to their context in this passage, we find that Mary’s pondering, or reflection, has three primary qualities. The first is that it is a ***slow process***. Jesus was 12 years old when they heard him teaching in the temple. He was 30 when he was baptized and started his public ministry. After Luke finishes talking about the birth and childhood of Jesus, he leaves us hanging on all this and jumps straight into how his public ministry got started. The implication is that Mary spent 18 years reflecting on the events and sayings surrounding her son’s birth and childhood, wondering what they might reveal about his future. Then Luke places on exhibit the life and ministry of Jesus that resulted from favor with God and love from a reflective mother. Mom’s don’t forget stuff about their kids.

The second thing we need to know about this pondering is that it was a ***deep process***. Keep in mind that we westerners are linear thinkers that add up details one at a time in chronological order. Easterners are circular thinkers that look more at the overall themes of an event or story or prophecy. So, we need to remember that reflection means more than processing individual parts of our lives, because as we all know sometimes we can’t see the forest for the trees. If that happens, the big picture that God is communicating won’t get into our hearts. And like Mary, that’s where we want our reflections to end up ultimately—in our hearts.

The third thing we need to know about this pondering is that it was a ***humble process***. It takes a certain character quality in order to do the kind of reflecting that Mary did: humility. Remember Mary’s Magnificat? She said that

God “has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” When the proud go down, their inflated self-image that was built on false self-understanding goes down like a house of cards, and their thoughts are scattered into confusion. Mary understood that pride makes us neglect the things we don’t want or expect to see. We might do so consciously or unconsciously, but either way, it can lead to misdirection at best or our downfall at worst. So Mary treasured everything, even if it meant something undesirable would happen to her or her son, so that she would not stand in the way of God’s plan.

The bottom line is that humility means listening and being open to whatever results in your life, good or bad. Many times we are not only afraid of suffering, we are also afraid of success, because we mistake low self-esteem for humility. It also means being open to whatever God is communicating, even if it conflicts with what you always thought, felt, or did, and remembering that even if you think you have it all figured out you could still be wrong. It means continuing to search with an open mind rather than glazing over the things we don’t understand. That’s why reflection, if it is going to bring you any insight into what God is doing in your life, needs to be a slow, deep, and humble process.

Why she treasured/pondered (the product/result/impact of reflection)

Here’s what these three things all come down to: Just like God rained down manna in the desert to feed Israel, he is indeed able to feed our souls directly with little or no effort of our own. However, most of the time he chooses to abide by the rule that he who does not work does not eat. He who does not put the labor into processing the bread of life does not get to be nourished by it. So the question is, are we content to just keep telling ourselves the same things? If we are, we will only be adding braces to our skyscraper of ignorance. Or are we hungry for a deeper understanding and willing to put in the time and effort of focused reflection to get there, no matter what it may mean for us?

Romans 12:2 says “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We live in a corporate culture where brainstorming is valued as a fast way to spew out lots of random ideas in the hopes that one of them will be a good solution. Ideas are good, thinking outside the box is good. But don’t forget that the church is a spiritual entity. As spiritual people, our conversations about what to do next will have to go beyond brainstorming and into meditation on what God is doing in, around, and among us.

A few years ago I took a class called “Focused Lives”. The whole idea of the course was to look at your life as a narrative. Each one of us in the class constructed a timeline of our life made up of what we called the “critical incidents” or significant events in our lives and wrote about how each one of those critical incidents contributed to the formation of our character, beliefs, purpose, values, methods of ministry, natural abilities, acquired skills, and our awareness of and development of our spiritual gifts. It was very introspective. And then we put that all together to discern what sort of ministry God designed each of us to do and how we will use that knowledge to make decisions in ministry. Sounds like a really helpful class right? Well, it is. Most of my classmates were amazed by the clarity it brought to their lives, to what God was doing in them and through them. But it’s the hardest class I’ve ever taken: not in the academic sense but in the emotional sense: it forced me to think in depth about some things in my life that I wanted to forget about: things that definitely formed my character and beliefs but left me feeling utterly confused when it comes to making decisions about what path to take in ministry. I don’t regret taking the class, it did clarify some things for me, but some days my homework actually brought me to tears. So I feel like I can identify a bit with Mary when she is collecting and pondering things that are hugely significant but raise a lot of questions at the same time.

As humans, we tend to only see what we are ready to see, what we expect to see, or what we want to see. Christian reflection is a discipline that takes us beyond that. It’s an intentional process of digging into Scripture, yourself, and events or people around you to make observations about what God is doing, and then putting those observations together to form insights about how you can get on board with God’s work in a way that is consistent with the way God made you. Those insights are discernment, and that’s the goal of reflection.

Ruth Haley Barton defines discernment as “the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in larger decisions, so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing.” Next time we will just look at how Mary’s reflections led to discernment. The point for today is don’t neglect to reflect, in a slow, deep, and humble way. Randy Reese says it this way: “At some point in our faith journey we wake up to the fact that God has already been at work in our lives, loving us, preparing us and realigning us toward a way of life and service that befits who we really are. Then the questions become, ‘What are those good works God has given me to do? and does my way of life reflect those good works?’”