

*From the Pastor's Desk:*  
*A Sermon for Saturday, December 24, 2022 - Christmas Eve*

How do you respond to good news?

That's a tough question, isn't it? I mean, if you asked me, "How do you respond to bad news?" I could not only supply you an answer, but give you an entire chronological accounting of my responses. And that's because I'm a fan of Ohio-based sports teams and they have all, collectively, given me ample opportunity to rehearse my responses to bad news. It begins with shouting – as, for example, how I spent the third and fourth quarters of the recent Ohio State versus UofM game over Thanksgiving weekend – but once I've tuckered myself out like the emotional toddler that I am, it turns to skulking – as, for example, how I spent the three hours *after* the recent Ohio State versus UofM game. For really bad news – not just of the sports variety, but of the more intimate and interpersonal, like the illness of a friend – I'm also very capable of turning to worry, anxiety, and depression. My responses to bad news are multifaceted. I'm EGOTing at bad news. That's right, I've got an Emmy, a Grammy, an Oscar, and a Tony at bad newsing.

But I'm not sure I know how I respond to good news. And this little fact either explains a lot about my mental health *or*, and I'm talking about this at all because I think this is the case, it explains a lot about the human condition, the human condition of which you have your unique share of as well. I don't suspect I'm alone in knowing better what my standard response to bad news is than to good news. [pause] And look at that! 272 words into my sermon and I've already depressed an entire room full of people... on Christmas Eve... in church. Yikes! Hang with me, though, because this is still Christmas Eve in a church, which means you already know that Good News is going to win the day.

I start with this question about good news because we have two primary characters in our gospel reading from Luke – Mary and the Shepherds. And between these two, we see two wildly different ways of responding to Good News. For the Shepherds, Good News is a sweaty, loud, excited affair. They get the report of this Good News from an angel (and then from a whole heavenly host of angels) and seem to immediately break into a leaping, joyful sprint in their efforts to confirm the veracity of what they've heard. Mary, who admittedly has been letting this Good News gestate for many months now, is in a different place. When these Shepherds come crashing into her life – and I can't help but think that there is three of them and that they're friends and that they behave something like the Three Stooges with each other – they are, again, panting and talking over each other and, undoubtedly, waking the baby. Mary, for her part, takes this all in and then we read this line that has captured theologians, pastors, and laity alike for centuries: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

I think it's that "But" that begins verse 19 that gets me. It signals that Mary is different,

standing apart, from the reactions and responses of those around her. That's a big ol' "but" in this story. And, yes, I intentionally wrote the phrase "big ol' but" because I thought we might have some children present tonight and I wanted to at least try to make listening to me worth it by saying something silly like "big ol' but." Parents, I'm sorry if this is all they take from this evening. If so, let me know. I'll make a New Year's resolution to be better next year.

Anyway, Mary's response is unique, different. And, again, maybe this is the result of just having more time with all the Good News in her life, but I think it is more, because we're also told that she "pondered them." It's that pondering in the middle of verse 19 that also gets me. It implies an on-going process of wonderment and awe. Yes, she's known longer than anyone other than God what is going on, but still she is pondering, still she is turning all these events over in her heart.

Oh, and that's the third piece that gets me – the "heart" at the end of verse 19. She isn't doing, as I try to do probably too often – that is, to think or reason her way through all this Good News. She's pondering *in her heart*; she's feeling her way through this Good News that has taken up residency in her. She's discovering that this Good News is more than a solid block of just one matter, but is rather layers and layers of unique aspects of Good News all pressed together. Or maybe it is an intersecting, tartan pattern of Good News crisscrossing itself. And she's feeling her way through each layer or along each line of the pattern.

In the happy responses to this Good News, we have two options – loud and contemplative – and of the two, I think there is an implied preference for the contemplative. This isn't to excoriate the Shepherds. They haven't sinned here. Their loud, exuberant laughter – yes, they've definitely woken the baby – is indeed joyful and delightful. I wonder if Mary didn't receive it with a sense of whimsy and humor, but those Shepherds have only scratched the surface of this Good News. Just shouting for joy – as my Ohio-based sports teams give me too little opportunity to do – is not the sum total of this Good News. Shouting, you'll remember, is often also a part of responding to bad news too. Lots of bad things are very loud – like the air raid sirens that may very well be ringing out in Kiev even as we sit peacefully here.

I pivot to Kiev not because, by now you're assuming, I'm just insistent on ruining Christmas like the Grinch, but because I think we can learn A LOT about what this Good News born unto us means when we compare it to the grisly status quos of life. For the status quo, even in the most charmed of lives, still so often bears the marks and stains of sorrow, violence, fear, and a whole hellish host of other happenings that we'd rather wish not to experience. I also pivot to the hardships of life because I think they are part of Mary's pondering because, to be sure, Mary's life was not immune to these hardships as well.

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Mary is born a member of Israel during a time when her home and her people were being occupied by an outside Roman force. She was taught that her land was to be one flowing with milk and honey, but too often all she saw was blood and bitterness. Add to that the experience of nearly losing her betrothal to Joseph because of her unexpected pregnancy, as well as just the general social standing of young women in her time, and Mary is not unacquainted with bad news. Indeed, hers was a life much more reflective of Kiev than Bowling Green.

I suspect Mary responds as she does because she lives in the legacy established by the prophet Isaiah from our first reading this evening. Isaiah is also trying to cast of vision of hope, of Good News that is to come. And we can thank the composer Handel for helping all of us appreciate Isaiah's vision, as it is central to his *Messiah*. And while we're likely to remember the happiest bits the most – the “increased... joy,” the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” pieces – Isaiah's prophecy is layered and complex. There are also images of “dividing plunder,” of “boots of the tramping warriors,” and of “garments rolled in blood.”

It is easy, given that Isaiah was written 2,500 years ago, to lose the context for these images. They are not the imaginings of a particularly creative individual. They are, instead, the recounting of real-life events Isaiah had undoubtedly witnessed, even experienced. For at this time, Israel was also under besiegement and so the “plunder” that had been divided were *their* material resources, and the “tramping warriors” were their foes, and the blood... well, you get it. What makes Isaiah's prophecy so powerful is that it utilizes the images of trauma – Kiev-like images – in order to create a vision of Good News. That's amazing! That's also amazingly difficult. Because more often than not, we try to take the traumas of life and push them down, hold them in, and hope they don't give us chronic Gerd at the base of our throats.

So, for both Isaiah and Mary, there is an intimate acquaintance with bad news and Good News. The options in terms of their responses to this complexity is either heartburn or heart-pondering. And this is where you get to identify with them both. For I don't know all that is happening in each of your lives, but even still I'm confident in claiming that your life also reflects the complexities of intermingling bad news and Good News. What is modeled for you, then, is the heroic, brave, and holy option to hold both together. Indeed, to go even further and find within the images born of trauma the hope that Good News still wins the day all the same.

It is impossible to be the shepherds in this story. It's impossible because the shepherds are two-dimensional characters, they're flat characters. They are known exclusively for their one emotion – exuberant joy. And that's nice for what it is, but it

isn't reflective of your life, or Isaiah's life, or Mary's life, or the lives of so many in Kiev right now. It's impossible to be the shepherds because our God made you three-dimensional. And thanks be to God for this because being three-dimensional is the beginning of growing into spiritually mature people – the sort of people like Isaiah and Mary who can patiently, faithfully ponder what God is up to as God transforms the images of trauma into visions of hope.

This Christmas season is full of two-dimensional joy. It streaks through every commercial, every Christmas song, every fantasy of “the best Christmas ever!,” which is a pressure we put on ourselves year after year in what can only be described as a fool's errand. But the real Christmas story – the one that draws you here tonight – is one of a richer joy. It is one of a transformative peace, of a revolutionary love, of a holiness capable of taking the traumas of life and reforming them into a place of communion with you and your God.

And that's why we turn to this Table now. This Table is not only for those who already come sweaty, panting, and joyful to this place – though if that's where you are, you are still welcomed to this Table – but for those who come overwhelmed by the complexities of Good News and bad news, of joy and trauma. It is the Table where the Good News wins the day as it fills your life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.