

On this most holy of nights, we give our attention to Mary’s reaction to the birth of her Savior. She had been visited by the glorious angel Gabriel. She carried the Christ Child—conceived miraculously in her Virgin womb. She gave voice to her praise in her now famous Magnificat.

And with the birth of her Son—who is also the Savior of the world—Luke tells us that—in the quiet of that simple stable—she pondered all of these things in her heart. The trip to Bethlehem—the humble surrounds—the shepherds’ report about angels—the Word made Flesh. She drank in this moment—holding the baby Jesus in her arms. But it was more than the embrace of mother and Child. She knew Jesus’ identity. She knew Jesus’ purpose. She knew what God was doing.

And there are reasons for her to know. The Angel Gabriel does what angels do. They are messengers. And he tells Mary about God’s plan for this Virgin-born Child. We don’t hear this reading this year. But it is worth repeating the message Gabriel leaves with her. This is from Luke 1.

“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you...Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Along with the angelic proclamation, Mary has the Prophetic witness. And her knowledge of the ancient Scriptures evident in her response to Elizabeth’s blessing. The title *The Magnificat* is just the Latin with which her song begins. We sang this throughout our Advent Wednesdays. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

And here, we see Mary as a mature theologian—even though she is likely still in her teenage years. She begins with the words reminiscent of Psalm 34, “Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!”

She grapples with Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2 at the birth of the Prophet Samuel. She finds hints of this Promised Child in the Psalms. She sees the explicit predictions from the Prophet Isaiah. The Good News of Jesus is all over the Old Testament. And Mary gives voice to her sophisticated theology in her song that we still sing in the church.

Clearly, that is a lot to consider. And she will learn even more from Simeon and the Magi. And now, it is all realized in this tiny Child born in the midst of God’s creation—in the middle of human history. The fate of the world hangs with Him. And so, she mediates on God’s Word. She ponders all these things in her hearts. She practices the contemplative life—the receptive life—the repentant life—that we talked about in Advent. And Luke leaves all of these details for us to do the same.

I hope that is what you are thinking about tonight. All that the Prophets foretold. The birth of the Savior of our race. God made flesh. The incarnation. Honor. Glory. Dominion. And here we are—following Mary’s gracious lead—separating ourselves from what everyone else is doing—taking this particular moment—on the very footstep of The Nativity of Our Lord—to meditate, ponder—to think God’s thoughts after Him.

I don’t talk much about the devil—especially on Christmas Eve. I don’t think he deserves the attention. But I also think we should be aware of his practices. He is a real creature. He exists in our time. The devil is especially busy distracting us in this season. Filling our hearts and schedules with other things. We are often so caught up with family—with gifts and cooking and traveling and football games—all good things. But the devil often uses good things—stretched beyond their proper place—to keep us from pondering what God was doing in Nazareth at the Incarnation—and in Bethlehem at the Nativity.

And so, this Christmas Eve—in these last few minutes of the day—let’s stop—pause—let all those things go for this one hour. And let’s give ourselves over to what the church has been doing for millennia. We pay attention to the traditions that have been handed down to us.

We Lutherans keep traditions. We are often criticized for it. Maybe you have even made such criticisms. The church is too old fashioned—too repetitive. But, by the end of this sermon—and this is my purpose to night—I want you to leave here tonight being more traditional than when you walked in. There is a point to all the repetition.

But to make such a recommendation, we need to understand what tradition is—and what tradition is not. First—and I hope this is obvious—being traditional isn’t synonymous with conservative. Now, I am in favor of a conservative theology. We should guard the trust that has been extended to us from the Apostles.

But I don’t have anything particularly political to say tonight—in the traditional definition—except for the fact the coming of Christ turns the political systems of the whole world upside down. Since the coming of Christ, the world just cannot continue its typical patterns. We probably won’t fix many of our public institutions tonight. But we can rest in what God is doing in the world.

In the Magnificat, Mary says it this way, “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” And this is very good news for us who look to Christ as our King.

And second—by tradition—I don’t mean mindless repetition—or dead orthodoxy. Tradition is not an opposition to change. I don’t mean that line we so often hear, “That’s how we have always done it.” I don’t mean doing everything exactly as we did it last year—or ten years ago—or back in my day.

Tradition doesn’t mean that there is some golden age—back in the eighties—or fifties—or even the 1500s—that we are trying to recover. It doesn’t mean getting my own way with family customs for how things ought to be during the holidays. I hope you have heard my encouragements to serve your family this week—sacrifice yourself and your expectations—instead of demanding your way.

So, I am speaking about a different kind of tradition. Listen carefully to how Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians 11, “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.”

And again, in 2 Thessalonians 2, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

In the New Testament, the Greek word for *tradition* means something like *a teaching or practice that is handed down or passed on*. It is sometimes used negatively—like that of the Scribes and Pharisees, for example. But it is also used positively in the two passages we have just heard from St. Paul.

A couple of years ago, our theme verse for the year was from Psalm 145. Let me read a verse before and a verse after verse 4. The context reminds me both of Mary’s *Magnificat* from the hill country of Judah and Mary’s pondering in Bethlehem. And it is what we are trying to accomplish tonight.

The Psalmist says, “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.”

So, tradition is passing on what has been given to us. But our tradition is not just sentimental. It is not just a matter of preference. It is more like what God has entrusted to us. And our tradition does go back to the Reformation. But it even extends even farther—back to the Church Fathers—back to the Prophets and Apostles—to Jesus Christ Himself.

And you will find it in our hymnody. In our liturgy. In the feasts and festivals we keep. In our calendar. In our church year. These practices are ancient. They go back to the earliest days of the church. But even more significantly, we have been given the charge to guard the message of Christ. It is our theology that matters most. We are to understand what God is doing in Christ at the incarnation. We see that He is God with us. We are to pass this faith down from generation to generation—just as it has been passed down to us.

I like the way that G.K. Chesterton said it—the great apologist and theologian of a century ago. In his wonderful book simply titled *Orthodoxy*, he said, “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”

The Church is always looking back—even as the Prophets of the Old Testament were always looking forward. We are not so caught up in our own moment that we fail to treasure the saints who have come before us. We are not so caught up in what we like to do—that we fail to let the Prophets and Apostles guide us properly to Christ.

I think one specific way we can embrace our tradition is renewed appreciation for *reverence* before God. In the midst of all the frivolity and distraction that December brings—and since life is so radically casual—the church still takes seriously what this day is all about. With reverence and awe—we listen carefully. We contemplate the coming of the Son of God into the world to save us. We enter the church as a sacred space with reverence because we actually understand what is going on here.

And a second consideration is a renewed appreciation for those things that the church repeats. The church year. The liturgy. The Scripture readings. The rhythm of coming again and again to the altar—because we know what God offers us there. Yes, we repeat ourselves around here. But we do the same with all the things that we value. Find depth in the repetition. Get to know Christ more and more through the regularities of the Church.

In Christ—in the church—our life is contemplative—we take time to rest—to know the Scriptures—and think deeply like the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our life is receptive—we find our salvation in this tiny Child born in Bethlehem—and all that He has come to do. Our life is repentant—we leave behind the ways of the world—we return to the Lord our God. And we live in the rhythm of repetition and reverence—finding our identity and hope in what the Prophets and Apostles left for the church to do.

Let me leave you with a verse that we are going to learn together in the coming Epiphany Season. It is our theme verse for this coming year. It is from the Prophet Jeremiah. It was written more than 2500 years ago. But it fits quite well we have heard tonight.

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’” That is my prayer for you here on this—the night before the Nativity of Our Lord. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*