

December 24, 2023 Christmas Eve

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 2:1-20

"What We Preserve"

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They were a deep and lively red, as if they glowed from within. They were round and full to the precipice of bursting. Sour cherries. It can take up to five years before a sour cherry tree will bear fruit. And then, from spring into summer the fruit grows and ripens, transforming from green to a sparkling red. Then they can be picked in the morning and be in a delicious pie by the afternoon.

Or, they can be preserved, they can be turned into jam. On a bright sunny summer day they can be cooked over a stove top and slowly stirred, adding sugar, pectin and a dash of butter (and if it is for me, a hint of jalapeno as well). The flavor of the sour cherries gets distilled into something even more vibrant and powerful than the original fruit. Then the remarkable concoction is poured into pristine, waiting-to-be-filled, jars, and sealed tight. And those jars can be tucked away on a shelf.

Every summer up at our lake house my wife Marta spends a day making jam for the rest of the year. Sometimes she gets together with her dearest friend Sandy, a neighbor, now in her eighties, who originally taught her the secrets of making jam. They fill jar after jar. Sometimes her great nieces come to visit. She has passed the secrets down to them. They laugh and play together in the kitchen stirring and pouring away.

On a cold, gray day in January, after an endless string of cold gray days, those jars are still up on the shelf. The glistening red shines through them. A quick twist of the lid

and a pleasing pop of the seal, reveals a delightful, sweet scent. A crimson spoonful spread across a slice of toast and a crunchy bite fills your mouth with a burst of fulsome fruit flavor. It is as if summer has returned in all of its full-throated glory.

So why all this talk of jam?

In our reading from the gospel of Luke this evening we once again receive the story of Jesus' birth, of the divine's arrival, into the deepest midst of our humanity, to live among us. We get a decree from the emperor; the birth of a baby; a chorus of the heavenly host, and exuberant shepherds, breathless with excitement, exclaiming good news from an angel.

But I am always drawn toward the end of this story, to the mother of the newborn Savior. "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." I imagine her sitting there, exhausted from the birth, cradling her oh-so-young son, and the words she has received. The original Greek word for "treasured" also can be understood as preserved, as in preserves, as in jam. I imagine it as a metaphor that characterizes the spirit of what we are told Mary did. She wanted to capture and distill these remarkable moments and this proclamation of the angels brought to her by the shepherds. They told her of the dark night sky exploding with brilliant light, glorious music, and bold words. They told her of "...good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord...and on earth peace among those whom he favors." I imagine Mary gathered those words and images as if they were palpable. Mary scooped them up in her hands, experiencing the weight of them, beginning to comprehend their impact on herself and the entire world. And just as it is with any experience that is

overwhelming, joyful, beyond immediate comprehension, she knew she needed to preserve it and own it and not let it slip away into the randomness of what we save and lose in our memories. She took every shining, bright and ripe perception and word and feeling and carefully stirred it together. Then she found a safe place in her heart and mind to carefully pour it all for perpetuity. She placed those promises of good news and a savior for all the people within herself where she could pull them out whenever she needed them.

And it is a good thing she did. Because the days would not always be bright and full of promise. There would be darker days to come. There would be darker days for this babe soon grown into a man. Days of persecution, and imprisonment and death. Days when there was no sign of hope to be found in the entire world. Days that can break a mother's heart. But during those days she had the memories of those promises, safe and securely stored in her heart and mind. And Mary could pull them out and be reminded that when all appears to be lost God has promised salvation for all through this child born in Bethlehem. Just like opening one of those jars of preserved jam brings the warmth and light of summer streaming back to us, even in the dark and dreary days of January, so those promises of God offered the same consolation and hope to Mary.

This night is always one of sacredness and promise, and shining light, even in the darkness. We revel in the story of this child savior, so frail, yet so full of love and power and the promise of healing grace for us, one and all. Tonight it is a little easier to believe, to trust, to hold fast to the promises we have been given. But you and I both know that January will come. And there will be days that will feel decidedly less than holy, less than promising, less than

hopeful. There will be days when it will feel as if the darkness will overcome the light. Days that will break our hearts. This is why we need to do some preserving of our own. We need to carefully gather up the elements of this remarkable story. Gather up the story of infant born in lowly state, vulnerable to the world in so many ways, and the manner in which God chooses to enter into our midst. Gather up this child, who could so easily be overlooked is the light of the world, the promise of good news for all, a savior for each and every one of us. We need to take the story and the feeling we are experiencing this night and place it safely and securely in our hearts and minds. So when the world is dark and gray and hope is distant; when we are visited by anxiety and fear; when we doubt that God is present in our lives; we can open up that jar and welcome back this well-preserved memory.

We are reminded that oftentimes in the smallest and most unassuming of ways, God is indeed entering the world. We are reminded that the darkness cannot overwhelm this light. We are reminded that we have been promised peace. We are reminded that God's love will always be victorious. We are reminded that hope is always ours, if we invite it in.

Friends, remember and preserve, savor and save the candlelight and the carols, the story and the choir, the sacred and holy feeling of this night. For indeed, we have received good news of great joy, enough to last us all year long, enough for a lifetime and beyond.

Thanks be to God.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.