

-What is the true meaning of Christmas? The question that always seems to come up every year. I don't know if it is the same for you, but I feel this question is almost just as common as the lights on the tree or the caroling outside. Whether we go to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* or see *It's a Wonderful Life* for the 40th time the question of "what is Christmas really about" seems to hang over us even as we go about shopping, drink mulled wine, or attend 14 different holiday parties. Maybe it's a question we have struggled with in the past with our kids who start to get a little more inquisitive on why we do things at Christmas or gone through our minds while watching millions of Christmas advertisements. What do we say to our children and maybe even to ourselves in summing up an answer to this question?

-I was driving to a friend's house in the neighborhoods just west of Reserve St. and passed by a house that had a huge lit-up sign hanging on the side of it that read: "Keep Christ in Christmas" with big, bold underlines. Except, I don't know if this was a fluke or some joke, but the "t" in Christ had fallen down partly and was hanging below the underline part. Because the "t" was hanging in just the right place in relation to the lit underline, it made it look like a "p". This significantly altered the saying to "Keep Chrisp in Christmas". Though maybe some of us keep "crisp" this time of year, it's probably not the message the owners of this Christmas decoration were intending.

-But as the rebellious Christian in me chuckled about this sign, I got to thinking to myself: Christmas can be so amped up, so scrutinized, so "our family does this because we have always done this", so wrapped up in generalities, it can lose its personal meaning. Sayings like "Keep Christ in Christmas" or "Remember the baby Jesus" don't really seem to add anything.

-So if we take a brief pause from the gift giving, the carol singing, the political argument that you have every year with your Aunt Mabel, what is personal for you about Christmas?

-One of the things that I have found myself, this year, particularly drawn to in this story of Christmas from the Gospel of Luke that we've all heard 40,000 times is Mary. Mary, a young 12-13 year old girl, who brings this child into the world in a barn. Mary, who is incredibly uncertain of what's going to happen next, yet has more than anyone else in this story a personal connection to Christmas.

- "When [the shepherds] 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.

- "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." It's interesting to read this verse in Greek. "Treasured" (*suntereo*) can also mean "keep close" or "protect". Except there is a prefix on the word which adds an "up" action. So Mary here is literally "treasuring up" or "gathering up" in an action. The greek word for "ponder" here is a very interesting one: *symbollo* (where we get the word "symbol" from). It

means: “encounter” or “work out” (kinda like we do with symbols right?) What is so amazing to me is here we have these excited, amped-up shepherds who are kinda going crazy: they are the ones at the Christmas party who are whooping, and yelling. And then in the very next sentence: Mary gathers up all of these words closely and holds them close so she can work them out. Her connection to Christmas, to this child of God, is not the party, but the deep, raw, unfiltered bond to a hope beyond herself that she can’t completely wrap her head around.

-This Christmas is full of raw emotion for our family this year. My wife, Abby’s, 93 year old grandmother, Grandma Marty, had a pretty severe stroke in her apartment in San Francisco a week ago and passed away this last Thursday. She had her daughter (Pam- my mother-law) by her bedside every step of the way. Even though everyone is relieved that she is in no more pain and as Hannah, my sister-in-law says: “If God’s going to watch over anyone, it’s going to be Grandma Marty”, it is still an incredibly raw and emotional time for us at the moment. We all wish we could have been there with her.

-It just so happens, however, that Pam (my mother-law)’s friend, Tamara, is a nurse. Not just any nurse, but a hospice nurse. It just so happens that Tamara had an opening in her schedule and through a request to the hospice organization was able to care for Grandma Marty. How amazing is that??

-“And Mary gathered up these things and held them close.” Christmas this year for us has already had a very personal focus: namely the gathering up of one’s life that Pam’s friend, Tamara, was doing in a very special way.

-It also turns out this Christmas that we have something a little bit different in our lives too, Abby will be giving birth in March. This little one is already making itself known by its kicks, movement, and new life: sometimes interrupting sleep in the middle of the night. There is this connection to anticipation and the beginning of life that I cannot fully describe. The feelings and emotions of putting my hand on Abby’s stomach and a kick or punch happening, almost like a greeting or something, is indescribable. It is this incredible crossroads where I find myself right now: at the end of one life and the beginning of another. It is deeply personal and something that I only feel I am starting to gather up and work out.

-Have we allowed ourselves to make Christmas personal? Have we been able to get past pleasantries and “hallelujahs”? Because, at the end of the day, we don’t need just another gift or just another family activity. We need a gathering up and working out of this radical action of God for ourselves in a deeply personal way. We need to be reminded of life and death and that who we are personally (warts and all) as children of God matters to God. We need to be reminded that God works and does the impossible, even through a small, stinky, seemingly helpless baby. Christmas is a personal thing. May that joy, that frustration, that longing, that hope live in you this season. May you

never forget that it's OK and necessary to keep things close, to treasure them, and work them out as best you can. May you be able to sit with God this Christmas and be refreshed by the gift of this Savior to the world in new and personal ways. Amen.