

**A Christmas Story**  
**Rev. David Rowe**  
**November 25, 2012**  
**Text: Luke 2: 8-20**

Today is our Christmas bonus. Quite often, Advent, the season of Christmas, begins on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. We sit down for Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, kids are home from college, families gather, then, **boom**. Christmas starts. Advent wreaths. Advent candles. Advent dinner. We saw this this week with Christmas shopping beginning Thanksgiving night!

But this year, at least officially, all that Advent stuff doesn't start until next Sunday. So we have a week in between. We did Thanksgiving last week, we'll start Christmas next week, but today, we take a breather. Which seems to me like a good time to think about *Mary*.

The fact is, Protestants have ignored Mary, the Virgin Mary, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Not just ignored but even actively opposed. Folks might argue that Catholics have made too much of Mary, and Protestants have me too little of Mary. Catholics elevate her. Protestants demote her. Both extremes do an injustice to her. Half of Christianity sees her images in spaghetti sauce, and tree bark, and sunspots; the other half of Christianity has nothing to do with her.

The biblical facts are fairly simple and straightforward. God needed a human mother for Jesus. God wanted an intimate, personal connection with humanity. God chose Mary. Out of all the women who ever lived, God chose Mary. That is pretty impressive all by itself. Religion has added onto that.

When I played baseball, they said I was the first Protestant to play CYO ball, Catholic youth baseball. We played against other Catholic Church teams. They had names like "Mary, Queen of Heaven" , "Mary, Gate of heaven" and "Our Lady of perpetual help".

It was especially fun to beat them! We were just "St. Thomas Aquinas". But to go up against a team with Mary on their side, with all her perpetual help, with the deck stacked against us, and still win... Well, that was pretty cool when you were 15 years old. Besting the stuffing out of the Queen of Heaven? Knocking down the gate of heaven? Humiliating a team that had perpetual help? Proving that our Saint was better than your Saint?... Yeah, that was good.

I got to thinking about this, and Mary, and nostalgia, on Monday night. We were guests of the Mitris at the Broadway opening of their new musical, "A Christmas story". It was fun on so many levels! A new Broadway musical! Opening night! At the historic Lunt – Fontanne Theatre. 1500 people, full house. The red carpet, television cameras, press everywhere. And afterwards, a huge cast party, at the very hip *Lucky Strike* Bowling

Lanes on 42nd St. Great food, great energy, great fun... waiting for the reviews to come in, a classic Broadway moment.

And how was the show? Well, let me tell you what the critics said. The New York Post gave it 3 1/2 stars, calling it "charming... A sweet, funny, holiday outing... A rare family entertainment that doesn't feel like a soulless, dumbed-down corporate product... With equal parts warmth and rambunctious humor... A bull's-eye!"

The New York Times added, "it glows with sepia-toned nostalgia for a simpler time... A collage of childhood snapshots taken from the tingly, exciting month before Christmas."

Which is exactly why we loved it! This fun-filled show is a joy; we had a ball, and for me especially, it filled me with memories. And memories make every Christmas special. The very first one, if you were Mary; and, if you're willing, this one too.

"A Christmas Story" was written by Jean Shepherd, an iconic monologist, whom I grew up listening to on late night radio in the 50s and 60s. He was a brilliant observer of life. One of his stories, this 'Christmas Story,' was turned into a favorite Christmas classic, made into a movie in the 70s. It tells the story of nine-year-old Ralphie in 1940 Indiana doing everything in his power to convince his parents to give him a Red Ryder beebee gun for Christmas. Which request, of course, is met by the classic mom answer: "you'll shoot your eye out!"

I sat there on Broadway watching key elements of my life, my childhood, my family, my mother, my adolescent travails play out on a stage. That's how sermons sometimes are created. I'm sitting there tapping my foot, smiling, laughing, clapping, having a grand old time at this very nostalgic show, and suddenly a verse of Scripture pops into my head, and won't go away! It's Luke chapter 2, verse 19: "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." She pondered "in her heart."

Mary's Christmas story had just happened. She had just given birth, just like the angels had promised. The shepherds had come to visit. Angel choirs had sung in the heavens. A miracle star hung up in the sky. The wise men were on their way. And "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."

Mary was filing away her memories, producing her own first "Christmas story." She was building her own reservoir of nostalgia. Mary, like Jean Shepherd, was a keen observer of life, taking little personal stories and creating a narrative for the ages.

There is a new book out on Mary, a novel. I can't remember the title. I don't know the author. I can't find it, but I heard the author interviewed. And he said, in effect, "she was just a mom. Mary was first and foremost a mom."

I like that. I believe that. For me, at least, that doesn't deny the virgin birth, or take away the miracle. She may actually be the Queen of Heaven, and our Lady of perpetual help. She may actually appear in the oddest places to give people hope.

I was reading in the New York Times about a statue of the Virgin Mary in Breezy Point, a section of Queens devastated by hurricane Sandy. Many of you know that I skip church one Sunday, every August, to go preach in Breezy Point. I've been doing that since August 1969. You've heard the story. My father took my sisters to the Woodstock music festival, and literally got stuck in the mud. He couldn't get home to preach. So he called me at midnight on that Saturday night, and told me I had to go to Breezy Point to preach. I was scared to death, but I did okay, and they keep inviting me back!

It's just a little church, serving a little beachfront community. They buy my books by the box load, and support our work in India generously. The community is made up of a lot of cops and firemen, so they were hit hard on 9/11, and our church helped them then.

Now, during hurricane Sandy, they have lost 111 houses. 111 families lost everything, and their little clapboard church was damaged badly. On one house site, the only thing left intact was a statue of Mary. It has become a center of devotion, a place of prayer and worship. "A sign of resurrection," the local monsignor said. People count on her. My Protestant answer is, "of course they do, she's the mom!"

I say that with all due respect, and adoration, and awe - and I mean it. You've heard me preach enough to know that I put my mom on a pretty high pedestal, and if I had my way, Mother's Day would be the second biggest Sunday in our church after Christmas.

In fact, let me put that challenge out to you! This year, for the first time in decades, Mother's Day is not during our Dogwood Festival. It's just Mother's Day. No parking problems, no booths to run, clean up to do, chaos to manage. It's just Mother's Day. So let's do it right, and fill this church. Are you with me on that? Let's put Mary and mothers and all women on a pedestal. All their greatness, sacrifice, love, life itself. And memories.

If you go see "A Christmas Story," and you'd better if you have any sense, I want you to watch the mother. The star, of course, is the nine-year-old boy, and he is amazing. The dad is a terrific character. The Jean Shepherd narrator is perfect. The kids' ensemble is so much fun to watch, including a spectacular little tap-dancer!

But watch the mom. Watch her pull it all together, hold it all together. She coaxes her youngest child out of his shell. She guides Ralphie through the tumult of adolescence, complete with washing his mouth out with soap. (Been there, done that!) She keeps her fragile husband on track, even while life conspires against him. She endures all the inbuilt misogyny of a 1940s all-male household. She is gracious, sacrificial, strong, resilient, wise. She's a mom. And through it all, watch her. You can just see that "she treasures up all these things and ponders them in her heart."

With a week to go before we enter the Christmas season, I would urge you to do the same thing. The musical is a celebration of nostalgia, of old-fashioned ways, of a

simpler time. But it came to be because the author, Jean Shepherd, had a gift for remembering. All he did was invite folks to join him on stage to relive his memories.

So I urge you to do the same thing. Use this Christmas season to create some memories. Take a step back in time. Build a gingerbread house. Send out Christmas cards. Make your own advent wreath. Keep Christ in Christmas. Put up a nativity scene. Bake some real Christmas cookies, like the old red and white candy cane cookies. Make your pastor some Swedish meatballs! (Wait how did that get in there?)

Go to Rockefeller Center. Sing Christmas carols. Read the Christmas story. Make your pastor some more Swedish meatballs. Do something extra good for others. Actually shop, and think about why you're shopping. Go see "A Christmas Story." Tell your own Christmas stories. Tell **the** Christmas story.

Do what Mary did. Take all the parts of Christmas, "treasure them in your heart, ponder them." Isn't that a great word, "ponder"! How many of us "ponder" Christmas? We endure it. We get through it. We *may* even enjoy it. But this year: ponder it. Treasure it in your heart. Make the best memories of your Christmas past come alive again.

Do what Jean Shepherd did with his Christmas story. Make this a Christmas worth remembering. And maybe one day, your story will be on Broadway!