

Towards Long Obedience
Luke 2:1-20

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (2:19).

The world is awash in spirituality. People are searching everywhere for it. After church today, go home; sit at your computer and do a *Google* search of the word “spirituality”. You will find 46,400,000 sites. If that is too much for you to wrap your mind around, narrow your search and type in “modern spirituality” and it will reduce the sites to 7,130,000. Or put it another way, if you spent two minutes at each site you would be tied up for the next 27 years doing online research.

If you are like my mother who does not own a computer, go to *Barnes and Noble* and look up spirituality on their in store computers and you will find that they have 33,062 different books on the subject. Assuming that the average book is 250 pages and you read at the rate of 20 pages per hour and that you devote an hour a day to reading in the area – you can occupy yourself for the next 1,098 years, if you live as long as Methuselah.

I am all for spirituality. You could even say that I am in the spirituality business. We have even taught several adult studies on spirituality at this church over the course of the past several years and I know that there will be more to come. It is an important subject in the life of the church.

Bishop Michael Marshall reporting on his visit to Russia in the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall said, he was speaking to a Russian Orthodox priest about the easing of restrictions by the Communist and the emergence of religious freedom in Russia. The priest was pleased at the easing but was concerned. He said that the “crazies” were coming out of the woodwork. The modern day “snake oil salesmen” were cropping up faster than Johnson Grass in a pasture and there were plenty of people seeking to be spiritual. They were selling everything from self-help seminars to the latest name-it/claim-it prosperity gospel. In other words, they were selling a lie as the truth. Not dissimilar from today’s landscape.

N.T Wright in his book Simply Christian uses the metaphor of an iron willed ruler and watery spirits to describe this false spirituality. He tells the story of a powerful dictator who ruled his country leaving nothing to chance.

The dictator noticed that water sources around the country were erratic and in some cases dangerous. There were thousands of springs of water, often in the middle of towns and cities. They could be useful, but sometimes they caused floods, sometimes that got polluted, and often they burst out in new places and damaged roads, fields, and houses.

The dictator decided on a sensible, rational policy. The whole country would be paved over with thick concrete so thick in fact that no spring of water could ever penetrate it. The water would be delivered to people by a complex web of pipes. He also used the opportunity to lace the water with chemicals that would make the people healthy. With the dictator controlling the supply everyone would have what he decided they needed, and there wouldn't be any more nuisances from unregulated springs.

For years the plan went, well, as planned. People depended on and got use to the water coming through the system. It sometimes tasted a bit strange and sometimes the old timers would think back wistfully to the fresh bubbling springs of their youth. But the system was efficient and the people praised the dictator for his forward-looking wisdom.

Generations went by and all went well with the springs bubbling below the concrete. However, as time has a way of undoing things, the springs could no longer be contained. In a sudden explosion, they burst through the concrete barriers and erupted with volcanic like suddenness and power. Muddy, dirty water shot up to the heavens and rained down rushing through the streets and alleyways, pouring into shops and homes. Roads were washed out and whole cities were in chaos.

Some people were delighted – now they could get water without depending on “The System.” The people who controlled the system were at a loss, suddenly people could get all the water they wanted, for free, but it wasn't pure and it couldn't be controlled.

We are the citizens of that country. The dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our world for the past 200 years – making most of us materialist by default. The water that is bubbling up unrestricted is the hidden spring that flows in every human heart.

The skeptics of the past 200 years have paved our world with concrete, making people ashamed to admit that they have had

profound religious experiences. The Christian life was not compartmentalized in the west until we were embarrassed into doing so by the prevailing philosophy that said we will give you the water you need; religion will become a tiny sub-compartment of the whole, harmless in fact and carefully separated from the more pressing issues of life. "Those who want it can have enough to keep them going. Those who don't want their life, and their way of life, disrupted by anything "religious" can enjoy driving along concrete roads; visiting concrete-based shopping malls, living in concrete houses. Live as if the rumor of God had never existed! We live like the poem *Invictus* calls us to live and be live this way *because* we like its philosophy, we long for what it says:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul¹

This is the philosophy that dominates our culture. From this point of view, spirituality is a private hobby, an up-market version of daydreaming for those who like that kind of thing.² A private matter.

In 1987 Allan Bloom wrote the book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. In it he wrote that the cause of this decay of the family's traditional role as the transmitter of tradition is the same as that of the decay of the humanities; nobody believes that the old books do, or

¹ *Invictus*, William Earnest Henley

² N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p 17ff

even could, contain the truth. So books have become, at best, "culture," i.e., boring. As Tocqueville put it, in a democracy tradition is nothing more than information. With the "information explosion," tradition has become superfluous. As soon as tradition has come to be recognized as tradition, it is dead, something to which lip service is paid in the vain hope of edifying the kids. In the United States, practically speaking, the Bible was the only common culture, one that united simple and sophisticated, rich and poor, young and old, and—as the very model for a vision of the order of the whole of things, as well as the key to the rest of Western art, the greatest works of which were in one way or another responsive to the Bible—provided access to the seriousness of books. With its gradual and inevitable disappearance, the very idea of such a total book and the possibility and necessity of world-explanation is disappearing. And fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise—as priests, prophets or philosophers are wise. Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine. Contrary to what is commonly thought, without the book even the idea of the order of the whole is lost.³

Yet there is hope, because as Augustine said, our heart were made for you oh Lord, and they are restless until they find their rest in you. The hidden spring of spirituality is gushing forth and it is incumbent upon the church to be the sign post that points away from the polluted waters of modern secularism and towards the actuality that we were made for more than this.

When Marshall made that trip to Russia, the priest also told him this story. While under the communist rule, a member of the polit-bureau was visiting the church. He remarked to the priest, "I notice that there are only grey headed, old ladies here in church praying. What will you do when they are all dead?" "Oh," said the priest, "There will be more grey headed, old ladies to pray."

That is the tradition of the church. It has been kept in existence by the prayers of the faithful. Those who ponder the deep things of God and prayed their prayers to God with faithful lips.

The ancient rabbis have a story. It says that the world is held up by an altar and that altar is supported by the prayers of the faithful. If the prayers stop, the world will collapse.

³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 58.

Give yourself a gift this Christmas – give yourself the gift of practicing spiritual disciplines – prayer, Bible reading, and worship. Stay away from the “self-help” aisle at Barnes and Noble which paints spiritual discipline as some sort of do-it-yourself project; a weekend activity that makes you feel good about yourself. Do not trade the gold that God offers for the copper pennies of modernity.

It really is this profoundly simple – prayer, Bible reading, and worship. And it really is profoundly simple to begin these practices – just do them.

If you are not regular in prayer or don't know how, start this way “Lord, teach me to pray.” It worked for the Disciples. Then get a card and copy down the Lord's Prayer and use it as your beginning prayer and a pattern for your prayer and pray it every day. God will honor your obedience.

Start by reading the Bible, by picking up the Bible and reading it. But Pastor, there are parts that are hard to understand. I love the quote by Mark Twain, “It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the ones that I do!” Spoken like the Presbyterian that he was. Read a psalm each day. Read a few passages from the gospels, but start. God will honor your faithfulness.

Next, worship – our hearts are restless oh Lord. Let your heart rest by coming to worship, not to be entertained or to feel good, we don't intend to exchange the worship of the living God for entertainment – God forbid, instead come and rest in the presence of the living God; be washed and refreshed anew by the living waters of your baptism. God will honor you because you honor God.

When the shepherd reported what they had heard, Mary treasured them and pondered them in her heart. She wasn't searching the spiritual seas for self help; she pondered the deep things of God. Let it be so with us.

I believe the church needs Mary at this point in its history. The church needs to understand with fresh minds Mary's faith, the faith which led her to obedience; greeted by the angel she simply said, “I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.”

Mary, this simple servant of God, unencumbered by the trapping of religious legalism, simply obeyed. Don't drink from every polluted stream – stay in the pure waters of the spring of life that is the gospel.

Mary pondered these things in her heart – go - do likewise. Amen.