

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

In years past, dear friends, preachers like me have felt called to present a message of contemplation during the Advent season. We have often used these weeks of Advent to encourage people to slow down, to change their focus, so that they are thinking more about the 'true meaning' of Christmas. We typically find our people running around in circles, busy trying to set the table for the holiday by frantically attending Christmas programs and parties, buying presents and food at the crowded stores, decorating the heck out of everything in line of sight, desperately trying to meet deadlines for travel and entertainment. But this year has been different, and if you are experiencing some of the things I am, I'm finding that those with whom I speak are finding that they are doing less and thinking more. Even if their work or family situations are compelling, they have more time to think. They have more reason to contemplate. They have more cause to pray. So, this year, this Advent season, I am not going to admonish you to do less and think more; instead I'm going to share with you something about thinking.

You might expect that you are alone in your thoughts, that your mind is yours and yours alone, and that your time of thinking is not only personal, but private. But remember who created you with the power to think...a power not afforded to other creatures. Why did God do that? Our thoughts are where God can take the opportunity to communicate with us. God is in our minds, and in the minds of our hearts. As you think about things, you can hear God's subtle voice, you can feel God's unconditional love, find the reassurance of inspiration, and, yes, encounter the true meaning of Christmas...which is the Incarnation of Christ BTW. This year, absurdly different as it has been, has caused us each, I think, to spend more time in our own heads than we are used to. And that, ironically perhaps, can be a good thing. For God is there to share those thinking moments with us, and you might find that God has some important things, even some unexpected things, to add to our mental and mindful conversation.

The scripture from 2nd Samuel tells us that when King David finally got settled down in his new palace, he had time to think. He had been busy fighting wars and organizing the new capital of Jerusalem, chasing his destiny and defeating Israel's enemies left and right, but now came a pause in the action. He had time to really think. And what he thought was: Hmmm, Now that I have time, I could build a permanent house, a temple, for God to live in, right here in Jerusalem. For all time, people would remember and honor me for being the special king who built the signature temple, and God would just love it, too! But, since he had time, David decides to consult with the prophet Nathan. Now, if we think of the Old Testament as a particular style of literature, then 'consulting with a prophet' has a literary function: it means inviting God into the mental conversation. When leaders like David invite the opinions of prophets, they are allowing God's truth, God's dream, to influence their decisions. In the Bible stories, it's a literary device. So, when Nathan speaks with God's voice, he tells David that God has a different plan, that David has the opportunity, and God's blessing, to become a foundational Bible character, one with a special ministry, one who will be remembered for setting the stage for universal salvation. Because, if

David listens to God's call, God will build *him* a house instead, a dynasty from which the Christ may come with well-known credentials.

The Incarnation of Christ, the coming of the saving Messiah, is always God's dream. God wants to be known, to be present in creation. God wants to walk among us, be admitted into our mental conversations, to show a better way and illuminate a better path. And David has a role to play, as flawed and as downright human as he is. And the other Biblical character we encounter this morning is Mary, the young maiden who is planning her wedding to the more mature Joseph. What thoughts must be swirling in her mind?! 'I am to become a wife', she thinks, 'and I will need to run a household and cook and clean and care for this man who has chosen me to be his bride. God help me!' And God intervenes into her thoughts, in a dramatic way. To get her attention, God sends an angel into her mind, with an important message. God is calling her to her own special ministry, to bear the Christ into the world. 'What a thought?! Where did that come from?!' she ponders, 'I am perplexed, to say the least', she thinks. Yet, she receives God's dream. Like David, she takes a moment to discern her destiny and align it with God's. And, well, you know the rest of the story.

I think if I were called upon to write biographies of those we love but see no longer among us in this life, including those from our parish family, I would use as a theme my respect for the ways in which they answered God's calling. Remembering Shirley Laurin, Lois Irons, Art Hill, Connie Bernholz, Laura Bennett, and now David Meeker in such biographies would mean, for me, discussing the ministries which brought them joy. By ministries, I mean of course not just church-based activities, but rather all those things God had called them to do among us. And by joy, I mean of course not just those things which made them happy, but rather all those things which brought them inspiration and personal meaning. Their ministries, which brought them joy, as part of the human family reveal evidence that they have, indeed, invited God into their thinking, into their personal mental conversations. Each one of these most recent examples can remind us that we, too, are candidates for life-changing roles in God's dream, and can remind us, as Mary realizes, that nothing is impossible with God. That, as impossible as it might seem on any given day, grace can be incarnate among us.

If, in fact, the Incarnation is possible, and if, in fact, we can each help bear God into the world, then I encourage you, while you have the time, to invite God into your thoughts, into all those mental conversations you are having in this unusual year, that this may be the advent of new callings for you. Together, we are called to be the Body of Christ, as you have heard dozens of times, and that means that in some way, we are to be the Incarnation itself. We are to be the tangible, living, breathing expression of God's presence here and now. What we celebrate at Christmas is not just the birth of a mysterious and miraculous child 2000 years ago, but the birth, too, of God's essence in us, in our generation, in our time and place. Through Shirley and Lois and Connie and Art and Laura and Dave, Christ's presence has been manifested in our parish and in our community and in our hearts, and has continued the great work of salvation. May we also, by God's prophetic voice, discern our callings, and may our ministries be both efficacious and joyful. Amen

