"But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Luke 2:19

I have loved that scripture for years. I love that, after the eager shepherds left to spread the word that the newborn Savior was finally here, Mary was quiet; that she was still. I love that she pondered, and I have often wondered what she was thinking. I don’t know that any of us could possibly imagine the weight of the responsibility that she must have felt knowing she was holding the tiny Savior of the world in her arms. We can also only imagine her joy and the Spirit that must have been present with them in that sacred place.

I have learned, as I’ve researched the origins of Christmas, that early Christians didn’t officially observe the birth of Christ until centuries after He was born. And Christmas, as we know it, has really only been the festive holiday that we love for maybe a few hundred years. So, perhaps Mary was the first person on this earth to really celebrate “Christmas” a year later. And as His mother, maybe she was the only one to remember his birthday every year after that, even after His death and resurrection. I imagine she honored His birth in much the same way that we honor our own children’s birthdays: with the recollection of sweet memories, happiness and the bittersweet understanding that these tiny ones will only be ours alone for a short time. What a sacred time of reflection that must have been for her every year.

Travel forward in time a couple millennia later, and consider how we celebrate the sacred event today. Christmas is an exciting (and sometimes exhausting) time of the year. The month is filled with parties, shopping, finding the perfect gifts for those that we love, baking, cooking, cleaning, decorating, wrapping gifts, visiting loved ones, sending family Christmas cards and letters, stringing lights, trimming trees and singing sweet Christmas carols. It’s exhilarating and wonderful!

But have you, like Mary, ever taken a moment to stop and ponder Christmas in your heart?

I haven’t. Not really. Not until this last year. And it changed my family’s Christmas entirely.

This is where I will be honest with you: I have never really liked Christmas (as an adult, of course). To me, it’s a stressful and demanding time of year, and I feel pulled in many different directions. I dislike shopping in crowds, I tire quickly of the same silly Christmas songs being played overhead in every store, and the idea of elves watching my children through the windows of our home makes me uncomfortable. And then there’s that dreadful moment I walk into a store (in October, mind you) and see the Christmas merchandise on display. What ensues next is an odd feeling of irritation mixed with panic! And since we’re being honest here, I don’t like Black Friday. I know, I know. You’re shaking your head and clicking your tongue. This would probably be a bad time to mention...
that I really don’t care for peppermint. In short: the only thing I feel like I really ever “get” for Christmas is anxiety.

So, what changed? what made our family’s Christmas so different this last year? Did all of those things go away? Did all the stores start playing Silent Night (by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir) instead of “Santa Baby” (by insert name of scantily-clad pop star here)? Of course not. I’ll tell you what happened: I changed. And it was a very “small and simple” change (Alma 37:6): I slowed down... and pondered. And then I felt inspired that we should all sit down and open our scriptures together as a family. I tried to follow Mary’s example by providing an opportunity for our young family to be still, even if it was only for a few minutes, each night (I’ll share more about what we did specifically in a bit). And our very own little Christmas miracle happened: we all felt the true Spirit of Christmas! THE Spirit. We even felt it on Christmas day; that’s actually when we felt it the most. And we felt it the next day. I never experienced the Christmas “hangover”, not even once. I didn’t hate Christmas, and I didn’t feel exhausted and depleted afterward. It was glorious and special. I want it to be like that every year from now on.

Have you had any ideas on what can you do to focus more on the Savior this coming Christmas? What could you change to make sure you or your family really “gets” something great this coming Christmas? Remember Alma’s counsel: “by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). Perhaps it isn’t adding one more activity or creating a new tradition. Maybe it’s just “tweaking” an existing tradition...or even eliminating one. Perhaps it is just slowing down... and enjoying every minute of this time with your scriptures and with your Savior. Who knows? The Lord does, and He will help you to get your Christmas just right!

If you need an idea, here’s what we did: a Christmas Scripture Advent. I recently learned of the Catholic tradition of celebrating Advent and it stuck in my mind. So much so that I wanted to incorporate it into our family Christmas traditions. If you are unfamiliar with the custom, the word Advent “comes from the Latin advenio, "to come to," and refers to the coming of Christ”.¹ Those that observe Advent light a candle and read scriptures on each of the four Sundays before Christmas to commemorate the coming of Christ through his birth to Mary, His atonement, AND to remind themselves to prepare for when He will come again. Each of the items incorporated into the actual Advent wreath has meaning and symbolism, from the color of the candle to the evergreen that adorns the arrangement. It reminds us that there is joy in the waiting for Him! Not just for His birth, but the anticipation of His Second Coming. I love that. It is a beautiful tradition.

Because I procrastinated until the last minute, I decided to modify the tradition to suit our family as well as incorporate scripture stories that were special to us. So we lit a candle and read our scriptures each of the six nights before Christmas day. Everything was a symbol: the white candles symbolized the purity and innocence of Jesus Christ, the red candle represented His atonement for our sins and His Second Coming. I placed them inside of a circular mirror and a wreath to symbolize the eternal temple blessings that we can enjoy as a family. I cut some branches off of our
evergreen in the front yard and placed them within the candles (strategically, so as not to cause a fire) to represent that because Christ was perfect and resurrected, we can all be resurrected and have eternal life. The light from the candles helped us to remember that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World².

After dinner each night, we turned off all of the lights and outside distractions of the world and lit a candle. I prepared a little devotional for each night (which I will attach) and we talked about ways to become more like Jesus Christ so that we will recognize Him when He comes again. We talked about what it might have felt like to wait for the sign of His birth in the Americas, knowing that our family would perish if the sign did not come (3 Nephi 1:9). We talked about gifts that we have been given from our Father in Heaven, and about gifts that we can receive and give to others that cannot be purchased (like kindness or forgiveness). Then, as an almost spur of the moment decision, we sang Silent Night every night to close before we took turns blowing out the candles.

It was amazing and simple. It only took 10 minutes each night. The most miraculous part of this celebration, though, occurred on Christmas Day after all the presents had been opened and stockings had been emptied. We again sat around our kitchen table and lit each of the candles, finally including the red one that signified He lives and will come again. I shared with my family my testimony that I know He will come again, and I want so badly for us all to be ready for Him, whenever that may be. I read the recorded testimonies of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon that He lives! And they know this because they saw Him standing on the right hand of God.³ I could hardly get through the scriptures, because emotion overcame me and I felt the Holy Ghost confirm to my heart that this was true! My family felt it, too. I don’t know that we have ever had a time where the Spirit so powerfully testified in our home. We concluded, again, by singing Silent Night and blowing out our Advent candles. I will never forget it.

Another Christmas “miracle” happened on December 26th. My husband and I had finally put the little ones to bed and we sat down on the couch to relax before bed. The house was still a mess from the day before, but it didn’t seem to bother me as much as it normally would. We found a movie that I had recorded earlier in the week on BYUtv entitled, “Silent Night”⁴. It seemed like a perfect wrap up to our celebration, so we watched it together. It tells the story of how that famous hymn came to be and the simple, sweet events that inspired it. Again, the Spirit testified to my heart and helped me to feel the true and simple meaning of Christmas. It was so touching to me that we had sung this gentle hymn every night by candlelight, not knowing its origin or the magnificent way it would touch our hearts. The Lord always orchestrates the events in our lives so beautifully and perfectly, doesn’t He? Next year, we will watch it again on December 26th, but we will include my children. It was the ideal way to end our Christmas season.

And, that’s our story; the story of the year that we really “got” something special for Christmas. We “got” that Christmastime is fun and exciting and wonderful, but it is empty and dissatisfying without our Savior, Jesus Christ at the heart of our celebration. And I “got” that
when I take the time to be still and ponder, like Mary, the Lord will bless me with inspiration to know what “small and simple” changes I can make so that my family can focus on Him.

So, what are you “getting” for Christmas this next year? What is your family “getting” for Christmas? Are you “getting” that it is all about Him? Or are you like me, and forgot? I promise you that if you ask Him, He will tell you what “small and simple” things you can change to more fully feel the true Spirit of Christmas this year. He will inspire your heart and open your mind. All you have to do is take the time to stop.... and pray.... and ponder.


2John 8:12

3D&C 76:22–24

4http://www.byutv.org/watch/8902bf73-c22d-4a8b-964d-d30772e6a154/silent-night-silent-night
*SILENT NIGHT - you can watch this online for free or order the DVD.

Jesus Praying with His Mother (Gospel Art Book [2009], No. 33)

*Personal picture and artwork used
There's something incredibly special about sitting in a darkened room as a family, with the lights of the Christmas tree twinkling in the background, and your scripture pages being illuminated by candlelight as you take turns reading. This scenario brings a distinct sense of peace to my heart. It feels instantly like a wonderful tradition, even only after a day or two. In the coming years, I will also add Kim's idea of singing "Silent Night" each evening to our candlelight tradition. I love that suggestion, and know that holy songs can really bring the Spirit to our homes.

For our advent calendar, I cut a 5-pointed star out of thick wood and drilled holes along its edges to fit 25 long tapered candles (5 holes on each star point). You could set up your candles any way you like. I'm sure there are pre-made lists of scripture verses online that are tailored to the Christmas holiday, but I decided to simply continue on where we were in our family scripture study. All that I added to our holiday was the lighting of candles each night before we read. Simple enough. The kids were mesmerized by their glow, and it always brought a calm to our evenings that we often struggle with achieving on a regular basis. My kids also loved whispering "Merry Christmas" and blowing out the candles together each night.

Some nights you won't be home til late, or not at all. Don't stress over it. Just add 2 candles the next day, and you'll be right on track. I loved doing this advent for 25 days instead of 24 - because then you close your Christmas Day celebrations with thoughts again of the Savior, with calm family together time, and with the love of God in your hearts. May this be a new tradition that will bring, as President Monson has said, "the Spirit of Christmas, which is the Spirit of Christ", more fully into your homes this year.

Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.

--Anne Frank