

The words are familiar, and as the English language goes, they're not *that* archaic. But the meaning of the words has shifted slightly over the centuries. And so, we often miss what they're saying.

"God rest you merry, gentlemen."

I used to misunderstand this line. I thought merry was an adjective describing the gentlemen. 'God give you rest, you merry gentlemen.'

But that's not the line at all.

"Merry" is not attached to "gentlemen" in this song. There's a comma between them. "Merry" is attached to "rest."

The sentiment is, 'Gentlemen, may God rest you merry.'

So what does rest mean here?

The original lyrics were written in the 1650s before the familiar tune was added 200 years later in the 1850s. The original line was  
"(God) sit you merry."

Sit merry. Rest merry. In older English usage, this sitting or resting is all about staying in the same place and not leaving.

Rest means keep there, don't move. 'God keep you merry, gentlemen.'

The message is, "May God keep you merry. May you remain in a state of merriment, may you continue in a state of celebration, may you stay in a state of joyfulness."

Why?

The good news—remember it. "Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day."

Here we are on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Christmas. Christmas didn't end yesterday. It continues today and for another 10 days thereafter.

And the sentiment of this carol is that we need to rest in the joy of Christmas, we need to remain in a state of celebration. Why? Because Jesus is born! Those are the tidings, the good news, of comfort and joy.

Our Gospel lesson today is from John. It is John's extended prologue telling of the deeper meaning of Christmas. It's a wonderful reading and I preached on it in detail a year ago, and you can look that sermon up on our website.

But this morning I want to briefly return to a line from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke, a line which we heard 36 hours ago on Christmas Eve.

After the angels appear to the shepherds, they go to search for the Holy Family. And the shepherds find Mary, and Joseph, and baby Jesus lying in the manger. It was the same way the angels described it to them.

And then Luke says the shepherds tell everyone who will listen about what the angels said about this child. How his birth is news of great joy, literally mega-joy, which is for everyone. He is the savior. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord.

And Luke says that everyone who heard this good news was amazed by what the shepherds told them.

And then there's a wonderful line that Luke inserts that we might miss. He says, "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."<sup>1</sup>

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

I love this line. Mary doesn't let the experience pass. She clings to it. She keeps it in her heart. It sits with Mary. She rests in it. To paraphrase our hymn, we could say,

'God rests you merry, Mary.'

God keeps you merry, Mary, so let nothing you dismay.

Because you ponder, and you remember how Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day.

And a little bit later in the Gospel of Luke, at the end of the same chapter, Luke repeats this theme. It's after the story of the 12-year-old Jesus who remained in the temple to listen to the religious teachers and ask them questions.

After Mary and Joseph find Jesus, he goes back to Nazareth with them. But Luke then says,

"His mother treasured all these things in her heart."<sup>2</sup>

She remembers these things. She brings them to mind. She stores them up within herself, and then brings out again. Mary treats these stories like we might treat beloved heirlooms, like a beloved Christmas decoration that is brought out again and enjoyed year after year.

These remembrances must have been VERY important to Mary for Luke to mention them twice:

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." And, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart."

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 2:19

<sup>2</sup> Lk 2:52

There's probably a very good reason that Luke wrote these words. That's because there's a strong tradition that Luke knew Mary. It's not in scripture. In scripture, the last we see of Mary is in the first chapter of Acts.

There Luke says that after the resurrection, "Mary the mother of Jesus" was one of the people who gathered as part of the early Christian church.<sup>3</sup> But then she drops off the pages of scripture.

But there are ancient traditions that Mary ended up in Ephesus. If you connect some dots, it is possible Mary went there with John.

In John's gospel, when Mary and John are standing at the foot of the cross, Jesus says to Mary, "Here is your son." Then Jesus says to his disciple, "Here is your mother." And John then says, "And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."<sup>4</sup>

There are ancient traditions that place John and Mary in Ephesus. There are also ancient traditions that connect Luke with Ephesus. And there are yet other ancient traditions that connect Mary and Luke together in Ephesus. The Orthodox Christians say that not only did Luke know Mary. They also say that Luke dabbled in art on the side, and painted a portrait of Mary.

Now whether Luke painted a picture of Mary with paints or not, there's one thing that is incontrovertible: Luke painted Mary's portrait with words. And much of what we know about Mary comes from Luke's words. And if Luke knew Mary, then he got those words, those stories from her.

Luke writes, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." And he says again, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart."

It's not much of a leap to assume that Luke wrote these words and stories because he heard them from Mary herself. Luke focuses on Mary.

The Christmas story in Matthew is different. Matthew focuses almost exclusively on Joseph as the main character—Mary is just along for the ride in Matthew.

But Luke's Christmas birth narratives focus heavily on Mary. Perhaps that's because St. Mary herself told those stories to St. Luke.

And now we have received those stories. We have been told the Good News of Jesus' birth. We have heard the tidings of comfort and joy.

Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Will we hang on to them as well? Will we continue to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and his presence in our world?

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:14

<sup>4</sup> Jn 19:26-27

Mary had a unique experience that we can never share. For nine months she carried Jesus in her womb.

Carrying Jesus in the womb is unique to Mary—that's something we can't share

But afterwards, Mary carried Jesus in her heart—and that's something we CAN share. All of us can carry Jesus in our hearts. Let every heart prepare him room.

Like Mary, we can treasure these good tidings. We can ponder them in our heart. We can continue to celebrate the Good News of God coming amongst us, being born in our midst.

We can continue to celebrate, as St. John tells us, the fact that the Word of God, a part of God's very essence, a part of God's being, became flesh and lived among us.

So, God rest you merry. God keep you merry, ladies and gentlemen. Let nothing you dismay.

Treasure the good news of the birth of Jesus. Ponder it in your hearts.

Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.