

**A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Feast of the Holy Name, Year C (translated)
January 3rd, 2010 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Shepherds have to get back to work sometime, and a baby, after all, is a baby. When it's sleeping, there's a lot of time to stare off into space and wonder. Radiant joy fills that wonder. A sense of freshness and excited hopes.

But Mary also experiences the perils of wondering. She realizes, as most parents do, that you let people (especially babies) into your heart and, suddenly, their fragility becomes your imminent danger. They get hurt and you wince. They shine, and you rise up in splendor. They sink and you go down in a spiral.

It is like slowly building a treasure room in your heart with the beloved details of another person, and then finding that you have a massive security problem on your hands. We know that problem. We experience it with material wealth all the time. You buy a new car, and then you worry someone will steal it, or run into it. Something like that happens, though even more so, when you open your heart to someone else, especially a little baby.

Mary reminds us that it is not enough to bring God into your heart. When God comes, he never comes alone. He has strange friends, hangers-on causes, and projects.

And, he fidgets if we try to close them out. He seems to invite us to take them into our hearts, as well. To enshrine them as our treasures, just as we are his.

This, after all, is what got his son into trouble. The baby would grow up. He would take a lot of people to heart and suffer because of his love for others.

He would not treasure them in that modern, generalized way “as persons.” He would take them to heart in their concise, concrete humanity, with their lopsided resolve, their pettiness, their isolation, their feelings of guilt and violence. They would also bring along their unpredictable bodies. Their lusts, their wounds. Sometimes his heart would look more like an infirmary than a treasure room. His mother, Mary, would teach him a thing or two about love.

Christmas is a time for treasuring. Sometimes we get it backwards. We give gifts, not always as a sign that we treasure, but as an alternative to letting people, in their concise humanity, into our hearts.

The world is calling for a more intimate kind of love. Who will take on the poor and the elderly, the prisoners and the sick and dying, the cripples and the scrooges – who will take them on as the proud adornments of their own treasure rooms?

There are many, indeed, who do precisely these things. Christmas has always seemed to be a special time of their shining. They succeed where the innkeepers of the world fail.

They seem to need no return of their love. They watch and wash the decay of old age. They breathe the smells of poverty. They do not run from its menacing violence, but live in its shadow with kindness.

They nurse, and fetch, and listen, and gather other people into their quieting arms. They bring funny jokes into the grim halls of hospitals, orphanages, mental clinics,

prisons, shelters, and to the victims of war, natural disasters, and broken homes. They seem to have caught the spirit of God's love, which is so indifferent to the quality of what it takes in.

Paul writes in his letter to Titus, "When the kindness and love of God our savior was revealed, he saved us. It was not because of any good we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy."

Unlike Santa Claus, God does not ask if we were good boys and girls this year. The real spirit of Christmas takes the risk of love, just as Mary did.

Realizing this, the rest of us are humbled. If we are honest, we admit that we'd treasure more things in our hearts if we were convinced our hearts were big enough. We doubt our capacity for sentiment and feeling.

We ask, who could make a treasure room out of our barren stables? The answer, my friends, was born at Christmas.