

Sermon Advent Week 2 December 10, 2017

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the power of the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her promised husband, being a just and righteous man and not wanting to expose her publicly to shame, planned to send her away and divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you shall name Him Jesus (which means "The Lord is salvation"), for He will save His people from their sins." All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel - which, when translated, means, "God with us." Then Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and he took Mary to his home as his wife. Matthew 1: 18-24

Only in God do I find rest; my salvation comes from God. Only God is my rock and my salvation - my stronghold! - I won't be shaken anymore. How long will you attack others; how long will you tear them down as if they were leaning walls or broken-down fences? The only desire of some people is to bring others down low; they delight in deception. With their mouths they bless, but inside they are cursing. Oh, I must find rest in God only, because my hope comes from God! Only God is my rock and my salvation - my stronghold! - I will not be shaken. My deliverance and glory depend on God. God is my strong rock. My refuge is in God. All of you people, trust in God at all times! Pour out your hearts before the Lord! God is our refuge! Psalm 62

Today is the second Sunday of Advent: this season of preparing our hearts and lives for the coming of Jesus into the manger at Bethlehem, and into this broken world, and into our hearts. Advent is a word that means "coming" and although it's not mentioned in the bible, Christians have observed Advent since the 5th century. It's a time of readiness... not fill-the-stockings-and-trim-the-tree Christmas readiness... but a time of inner inventory, a time to contemplate the amazing story of God becoming one of us, and to prepare our hearts for Jesus' birth. During the extraordinary seasons of the church year - like Advent - there's an emphasis on soul-care and soul-readiness to prepare for God doing something extraordinary in history. And because God is not just the God of history but Emmanuel, God-with-us, the extraordinary work of God also

happens in us. It's hard to take this in... that the God who created the world and broke into human history by becoming one of us, is also Emmanuel, God-with-us, here and now.

Every Sunday in Advent has a theme. Today's is peace. At this time in the world's history, peace would be the best gift we could receive. Interestingly peace is like Advent, in that it's primarily an inner experience. Peace seems like something other people, other nations, and their leaders, should practice and give to us, but peace is actually pretty personal, and like Advent, it's an experience of the heart. Peace is known by three qualities: compassion, humility, and trust. In today's gospel story we hear of these three qualities in Joseph. Today, the peace Sunday of Advent, is a good day for us to hear Joseph's story.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed, which was a legal arrangement, and meant that Mary would continue to live in her parent's home. They would have continued to be chaperoned, and there wasn't any physical relationship between them. To be pregnant and unmarried in that time brought shame on the family and on the community, and in order to purge the sin and shame from their midst, such a woman was punished by stoning her to death. (At His last supper with the disciples, Mary's own Son Jesus, would take a cup of wine and give it to His disciples as a symbol of the new covenant: His blood spilled so that blood sacrifices were no longer needed for the forgiveness of sin.)

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, and to be righteous means to be right with God. Joseph would have known the Commandments, and the Prophet Micah's teaching about what God requires: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk

humbly. To be righteous is to walk with God... and to hear and see God in the world as well as in your heart. Joseph would have known the Law as well, and the penalty for breaking the Law. Not wanting to expose Mary for her illegal and immoral behavior, Joseph's idea was to quietly break their engagement (and I imagine that Joseph thought about quietly leaving town). Joseph shows us what godly peace looks like, through the compassion he showed Mary. Not much feels worse than being betrayed, and Mary had betrayed Joseph and was pregnant with another man's child. Joseph was righteous... he was right with God... and he didn't act with revenge but with care for the woman he was engaged to... the woman who had betrayed him.

How do we experience peace in a difficult situation... perhaps when we *do* want revenge or we want to hurt someone who's hurt us? One of the ways we can experience peace is to practice compassion. You might begin by meditating on God's compassion for you, and remember that God doesn't remember your sins, or hold them over you, or punish you according to them... and that Jesus took your sin to the cross, for love of you. Practicing compassion for an another, an enemy or someone who's wronged us, isn't a natural response. It calls for the supernatural love and strength of Jesus. It calls for us to pray that most important prayer, "Help! Help, Jesus, I can't do this alone. I can't forgive; I bear this hurt, or anger. Help me, Lord." Scripture doesn't tell us that Joseph prayed that God would help him through the disappointment and embarrassment and betrayal he felt. But it does tell us that Joseph was righteous, and that he acted with compassion. Compassion is one of the facets of godly peace. If we want to experience peace we need to practice compassion. Let's pray this together:

“Lord Jesus, thank You for Your compassion for me. Help me, Lord, to practice compassionate with others.”

While he slept, an angel of God visited Joseph in a dream and laid out God’s plan to break into history by becoming human. Of all the people used by God Joseph seems to have the most to tell us. The 19th century author G.K. Chesterton famously wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” The human ego is supremely strong and wants to be supreme ruler. Some theologians believe that the ego was created to resist God, in order for us to have to work and exercise our spiritual muscles, to train our egos to submit and surrender to God. This takes practice, like any exercise we undertake, and it doesn’t come naturally. Joseph was a righteous man, and to be righteous is to be right with God. It’s to walk with God, to listen for God, and look for God, in every situation and every decision. Joseph decided to submit and surrender his ego to God. One of the facets of godly peace is humility. Humility comes from the root word “hu [oo] mus” which means from the earth, of the ground. In the beginning, the story of Genesis tells us, God made humanity from clay, from the stuff of the earth. Every year on Ash Wednesday we embrace our earthiness by receiving ashes on our foreheads, as we hear this reminder: “You were made from dust, and to dust you shall return”. Joseph showed humility in being able to receive the message from the angel sent my God. Joseph didn’t need to point out to the angel that he, Joseph, was the wronged party, and that he was justified in walking away from Mary. Joseph must have had practice in submitting his ego to God, and in accepting his own brokenness and vulnerability and wrong-doing. And because Joseph was able to do that, he was able to listen to the

angel... he was able to listen for God's voice. Joseph's part in God's story would be small, almost insignificant. I don't know if the angel explained that to him... that he was a minor character in God's drama. Joseph is only mentioned in the Christmas narratives, and then in a couple of stories from Jesus' childhood, and then he fades away. Joseph was a very small part of God's plan, and he accepted that.

The ego is always defensive and ready to fight... to be indignant, to be right, to be self-righteous. Submitting and surrendering to God means that we admit that we might not be completely right... or even partly right... and that being right might not be the point of anything. Humility means that we're aware that we live - not by observing the 613 tenants of the Mosaic Law - but under the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. It means remembering that we aren't even able to keep the two most important commands: to love God with everything we are, and to love others the way the way we love ourselves. But we also need to remember that Jesus has shared our human experience, and knows our weakness, and loves the earthy stuff we're made of. Jesus, Joseph's Son, would one day use the elements dirt and spit to heal a blind man. God created the earth, the good clay we're made of. If we want to experience godly peace we have to train our egos to submit and surrender to God's love and kindness for us, and for others, and we have to practice humility, as Joseph did. Let's pray this together: **"Thank You, God, that I'm made from 'hu [oo] mus', from the clay of the earth. May that remind me to be humble"**.

Joseph had a very small part in God's drama, God's plan for the healing and redemption of the world. You and I probably also have very small parts in God's plan. And most of us won't be visited by an angel who sketches out the part for us... most of

us learn of God's plan by living, by loving, by stumbling and failing, and by being loved and forgiven... by God and by the community of faith. I find trusting God with the future, and the unknown, to be the most challenging thing to do as a person of faith. I have been a good student in the school of worry. And I know that I'm not unique: most of us are honor students in the school of worry and fear. Worry and fear are joy-stealers, and can make us deaf to God's voice and blind to God's presence. Trust is the antidote. Trust is built with little Lego-blocks of experience... Every experience of God's love and care for you is a Lego-block you can build trust with. And eventually trust is something big and strong enough to stand on. The Psalmist wrote about trusting God in Psalm 62, which we prayed earlier. I wonder if this is something Joseph also prayed, in order to be reminded... in the ghastly situation he found himself in of "outing" Mary for being pregnant with someone else's child and signing her death warrant... or sending her into isolation and quietly leaving their home town himself... I wonder if Joseph prayed Psalm 62 to remember God's kindness and faithfulness. "Only in God do I find rest; my salvation comes from God. Only God is my rock and my salvation - my stronghold! - I won't be shaken anymore... My deliverance and glory depend on God. God is my strong rock. My refuge is in God. All of you people, trust in God at all times! Pour out your hearts before the Lord! God is our refuge!"

This is a psalm of trust, which is another facet of godly peace. Trust, when we're afraid or uncertain, when we're facing the enemy within or around us, seems impossible. Peace seems impossible. But God provides tools for us to use to build trust, like scripture. Turn to the Psalms and read those ancient prayers of cries for delivery, and expressions of gratitude for help given. Remember that yearning to trust God - to

not be afraid of the unexpected or the unknown - is part of the human experience. What others have learned, like the psalmist, can be little Lego-blocks for us to build trust with.

Begin by connecting the Legos of your experiences of God. Have you had a spiritual awakening, a realization of God's love for you? That's a building block of trust. Have you heard the story and accepted the gift of Jesus' sacrificial love for you? That's a building block of trust. Have you experienced forgiveness for doing the wrong thing, for hurting someone or sinning against God? That's a building block of trust. Joseph's life, we can assume, was built on little Legos of experience so that when God asked him to step out in faith and do this enormous thing (to marry Mary and claim Jesus as his own child and to accept God as Jesus' true father)... When God asked Joseph to trust God, Joseph already did. Trust is one of the facets of godly peace. Trust that's built on all of your little Lego-experiences of God so that when you face the unknown and unexpected, you can, as Joseph did... listen, surrender, remember, and trust. Let's pray this together: **"Thank You, God, for all the ways You show up in my life. Help me use every little Lego-block experience to build up my trust in You."**

Thank You, God, for Joseph, and what he has to teach us about peace. May we practice peace, Lord, to help build Your kingdom, to help heal the world, and reveal Your love. Thank You, Jesus. Amen.