



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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DECEMBER 24, 2017
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
EVERLASTING LOVINGKINDNESS: GOD'S JOURNEY TO US

God's Journey to Us: Courage for the Day Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 1:18-25

Earlier we heard a passage from the prophesy of Isaiah which is often read on this Sunday in the season of Advent. Instead of God's voice, we hear the angry, anxious voice of the people pleading,

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! Isaiah 64:1-2

“Come on, God!” the Hebrew people shouted as they shook their fists toward heaven. “Show ‘em what you got! Take care of our enemies! Blast away all of the evil and corruption and unfairness in the system!” These words are the protest of a people who are weary and worried and frustrated after years of being picked on and taken advantage of by other people. We understand that feeling. But as much as we might wish for God to come down out of heaven and teach those other people a lesson, apparently God does not work that way.

In an earlier passage from the prophet, we hear God speak familiar words which we know best as the glorious recitative and aria from Handel's *Messiah*. These words sing in our souls:

Comfort ye my people saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain. Isaiah 40:1-4

Those are soothing, uplifting, joyful words which God speaks through the prophet to us. They are words designed for ordinary folks—people like you and me—because God most often works through folks like us to accomplish

his work in the world. Listen to another story from the Bible, one that is about ordinary folks and the extraordinary things God does through them. Matthew begins the story this way:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Granted, there is a lot a saber-rattling, rock throwing, and wall tumbling that takes place in the Old Testament histories of Israel, but when we pay attention, we discover that God's story is one of a journey that brings God to us. It is a journey which God undertakes because of God's love for us, a love that scripture calls *hesed*. The Hebrew word is and is often translated with adjectives like enduring, steadfast, and persistent. A good translation is "everlasting lovingkindness." From the beginning, God has set out to find us whenever we need a visit, encouragement, support, guidance, courage or God simply wants to be with us. God comes looking for us and stops by—even in a dream. As with Joseph, God often journeys to us to give us courage for the day.

A little while ago we sang that beautiful carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," one of my favorites. Of all of Phillips Brooks' beautiful words in that hymn, the last two verses of the first stanza always give me pause:

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

I reflect on those words and I think of Joseph, a young carpenter eager to establish his own business and begin his family. He has fallen in love with Mary, a young woman he has known all of his life, and both families have given their blessing. His dreams are simple: an ordinary but fulfilling life with sufficient means to provide for his family and opportunities to celebrate the goodness of life. Then one day his hopes and his fears collide. Mary tells him that she is pregnant and he knows it is not his child. She tries to explain that an angel told her the child is of God but Joseph knows that such excuses are the stuff of fairy tales and pagan myths. Hurt and confused, angry and wounded, Joseph decides to end their relationship and put Mary out of his life forever. Immediately, without fanfare or fireworks, without violent winds or breaking stones, God whispers to Joseph in his fitful dreams, “Joseph. Joseph! Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. It’s okay. She’s telling the truth. The child she is carrying is mine—ours—he will be the everlasting Light who will shine into the darkness of your people. Don’t be afraid of doing what is right.”

It is interesting that in his dream, the angel does not tell Joseph to not be afraid of this vision he is experiencing; the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to wed Mary. Don’t be afraid to follow your heart, to do what you long for, to do the right thing! Joseph does just that. They stay together. They have their baby and several more. And, except for those first two rather exciting years, they settle down in their home town and live an apparently normal and good life. We know very little about those years and that may be because they were ordinary, run of the mill, good years.

You and I know that ordinary lives usually take more courage than do the flash in the pan kind of lives which attract attention and resources. For regular folks like Mary and Joseph and the rest of us, every day brings challenges, obstacles, opportunities, fears, and joys. Ordinary lives are where hopes and fears meet practically every day.

Susan Sparks, Pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City, tells a story that is perfectly suited for this night. She writes,

[In late November of 2015], Jose Moran, the custodian for the Holy Child Jesus Church in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York had just finished setting up the Nativity scene and gone to lunch. When he returned about an hour later, he heard the cries of an infant. He went into the sanctuary and found a tiny baby boy

swaddled in purple towels on the floor of the manger. He was so young he still had his umbilical cord.

An earlier neighborhood surveillance video showed the mother with the wee baby in the 99-cent store buying purple towels, then heading out the door toward the church. What transpired was a 21st century version of the book of Luke. For that day in Queens, the world had no room for this little baby, so he was left in the manger by what turned out to be a single, unwed mother, and wrapped in purple towels (the color of royalty) from the 99-cent store. In fact, the congregation nicknamed the baby "Emmanuel," which as we know is Hebrew for "God is with us." Today, the baby is with a loving family and has a chance to begin again.¹

I imagine it took tremendous courage for that young mother to trust her baby to the church to keep it safe and find a good home. I imagine it took tremendous courage for Mary and Joseph to give their baby to the world—for our sake.

Following the bombing during the Boston Marathon a few years ago, columnist Thomas Friedman observed that if you watch some of the video captured during that horrific event, you will see many people running, not away from the bomb site, but toward it, despite the fact that other bombs might have been present.² That is courage—not to carelessly put yourself at risk, but to care more about helping someone else, to do what is right and good.

It takes real courage to trust what you love most to God. It takes courage to pursue a dream, courage to resist bullies, courage to live beyond the labels other people stick on us, courage to stand up to intimidation and abuse. It takes courage to refuse to let other people define who you are, courage to say “No!” to oppression, courage to say “Enough!” to predators, courage to say “No more!” to a permissive and uncaring culture. It takes courage to use our faith to guide our way, courage to believe that God is

¹Susan Sparks, “Sun Mo Manger,” Day 1 (December 24, 2017); available online at: http://day1.org/8079-susan_sparks_sun_mo_manger (http://day1.org/8079-susan_sparks_sun_mo_manger). (Time frame update in brackets.)

²Thomas L. Friedman, “Bring On the Next Marathon,” *The New York Times* (April 16, 2013); available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/17/opinion/friedman-bring-on-the-next-marathon.html?_r=0.

interested in what happens to us day by day, courage to maintain a hopeful attitude at school and work and home. It takes courage to think that God has an opinion on issues like taxation, healthcare, military action, education, immigration, and gun control. It takes courage to believe that moral leadership matters. It takes courage to raise up valleys, lower mountains, and make the way smooth so that all people can make their way back home. It takes courage to trust your betrothed and to welcome a child into your life. It takes courage to raise that child to take his or her place in the world. It takes courage to raise the Savior of the world.

God did not choose to ravage Rome or Jerusalem in order to set his people free from the rule of an oppressive government. Do you remember when Elijah, fresh from his bloody defeat of the prophets of Ba'al, and on the run from Queen Jezebel who wanted him dead, begged God to prove himself to the prophet? God agreed and invited him to emerge from his hiding place in a cave on the mountain. A tempest blew by, breaking rocks off the mountain, but God was not in it. An earthquake shook the mountain, but God was not in it. A fire scorched the mountain, but God was not in the fire. Finally a still small voice spoke to Elijah, and it was God!

"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," God whispered to Joseph. And he wasn't. God journeyed to Joseph and gave him the courage he needed to "take Mary as his wife." I like the way retired Lutheran pastor and Bishop Wayne Weissenbuler explains this attitude. He said, "Hope is the ability to hear the melody of the future and faith is the courage to dance to its tune today."³

As he slept, Joseph heard a beautiful melody of everlasting lovingkindness. When he awoke, he danced to that tune—all the way to the altar with Mary as his blushing bride. Thanks to the courage of Joseph and Mary, God continues to journey to us today. We still hear the tune and we, too, are invited to dance. Amen.

³The Rev. Rafael Malpica-Padilla, "The Courage of Faith," *Day1* (December 19, 1999); available online at: http://day1.org/703-the_courage_of_faith.

December 24, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How easily we could be lulled to sleep, O God. The gentle melody of music washing over our tired souls results in a perfect equation of rest. And yet, it is not simply a number of hours of sleep that we need; rather, it is that gift of peace for which we long. Grant us that gift, we pray, and our weary souls will be still indeed.

We do long for that peace of which the angels sang so long ago, a peace which settles upon all people bringing wholeness and contentment, well-being and a sense of gratitude. We are long from receiving such a gift, O God, for we are too concerned with all of the things we want for ourselves, often to the detriment of someone else. Heal first our wanton selfishness and then bless us with the gift of peace, we pray.

We are grateful for this day and for what it means to our faith. We thank you for the gift of Jesus to our world and for the gift of salvation to our lives. As we prepare to enjoy all of the temporal gifts that the next few days will bring, we do today celebrate the eternal gift of life which is ours through the Child of Bethlehem.

Forgetting ourselves for a few moments, we do pray for one another. We ask for your blessing upon all who are ill whether of the body, the mind, or the spirit. Provide them with the help they need and bring them to a place of renewed health, we pray.

Comfort all who are lonely and alone these days. We know that the holidays can be difficult times for many of us. Make your presence known, we pray, and bring into each life someone who brings a sense of understanding and good will. Soothe bruised hearts and comfort aching spirits and bring us all your peace, we pray.

We do ask for world peace, O God. We pray for an end to violence, terror, and hatred. We pray for a desire to meet the real needs of all people and a willingness to put aside unwarranted desires for the greater good of helping our fellow travelers on earth.

Abide with us, O God. Help us to truly welcome the baby in a manger and all that he represents in terms of our need and your provision. Help us also to welcome the teaching Christ who shows us how best to live together. And lead us to welcome the risen Christ who has conquered death in all of its forms and offers to raise us to a new kind of living. Come and dwell with us, O God, and grant us your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.