

SERVING BRINGS JOY

Luke 1:26-38

December 5, 2021

This Advent season we are looking at the Christmas story through the eyes of Jesus' step-father – faithful Joseph. Last week we began by looking at the life of a carpenter named Joseph who lived in the town of Nazareth and the important role he played in Jesus' early life. Although not His biological father, Joseph adopted Jesus as his son, protected Him, provided for Him, taught Him a trade, and mentored Him during those critical formative years. There is very little mentioned about Joseph in the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and Joseph is never mentioned in any of our Christmas carols; however, his is an important story that should especially speak to us men – as Joseph is a role model to follow for husbands, fathers, step-fathers, and grandfathers on how to be a godly righteous man who sacrifices for others, especially during those challenging and difficult times that come to every family.

We are also learned last Sunday that Joseph was not only a devote follower of God – but also a man of noble character which is critically important to the Christmas story, and the reason Joseph was chosen by God to be Jesus' earthly father. The first test came for Joseph when he found out his fiancée Mary was pregnant and he was not the father. Joseph as a devote Jew had every legal right to divorce Mary for unfaithfulness, but after a visit from an angel in a dream, he immediately took Mary as his wife, protecting her reputation and possibly even saved her life. And then by not consummating the marriage and keeping Mary a virgin until Jesus was born, Joseph also protected the miracle of Jesus' virgin birth, so that the prophecy given by Isaiah 500 years earlier, would be fulfilled. And lastly, by naming the baby, “*Jesus*,” Joseph exercised a father's right and privilege; thereby, officially taking Jesus into his family as his own legal son. As we read the Christmas story, we can't deny the fact that the Christmas story begins as a scandal that haunted Jesus' entire life as He was accused of being conceived out of wedlock, and even worse, the result of an adulterous affair. We of course have the good fortune of knowing that's not what happened, but back when Jesus walked this earth most likely only Mary and Joseph knew that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit!

The New Testament begins with the Genealogy of Jesus for a good reason, because it tells us how God works throughout history, from one generation to another, and continues to work through history today, one generation building upon the shoulders of the previous generation. Today here at SCCC, we are preparing the

way for the generations that will follow us. Building on the foundation of Christ and the past generations. Matthew's genealogy not only establishes that Jesus was a descendant of King David, which means that He was eligible to be the promised Messiah, but Matthew even goes back further to the Jewish patriarch Abraham. Abraham was called by God to separate himself from his ungodly lifestyle and leave the world he knew to become a new nation, a nation that would serve the one-and-only creator God, a nation God could use to bless every nation of this world.

Every Jewish person considers themselves to be a descendant of Abraham, so the promise given to Abraham by God in **Genesis 12:3** pertains to every Jew as an everlasting covenant, *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* For Matthew, Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise, who came to usher in the kingdom of God; thereby, blessing every nation of this world. And, according to the Apostle Paul, that blessing is not only for the Jew, but also for us gentiles as well, who have now become part of this everlasting covenant given to Abraham and his future descendants. Paul writes this in **Romans 11:17**, *"Some of the branches have been pruned away* (unbelieving Jews made room for others to be grafted in). *And you, who were once nothing more than a wild olive branch* (unbelieving Gentiles), *God has grafted in – inserting you among the remaining branches* (believing Jews) *as a joint partner to share in the wonderful richness of the cultivated olive stem* (true chosen people of God)." God's promises given to Abraham are now the promises for every believer who calls upon the name of Jesus. The promise given to Abraham in **Genesis 12:3** is also our promise – we are blessed to be a blessing to others!

When we became a Christ follower, we are grafted alongside of God's chosen people, the Jewish believers, called to carry out God's mission, which is to bring the unbelieving world to Christ, to His saving grace. We do that today by being obedient to Christ's great commission that was given to His followers, as His final command before ascending into heaven: *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you"* (Matthew 28:19-20). As Jesus' ministry continued through His early followers when He ascended back to His Heavenly Father, it also continues through you and through me today. In this way, God's promise to Abraham continues to be fulfilled by the church until Christ returns, as we share our faith and lives with other, hosting His presence

wherever we go; thereby, helping our community to be a better place for all to live, believers and unbelievers alike, as we continue to grow the church – from glory to glory!

This means that every believer is responsible for those around them – and this is the main point of this Advent message today. Unfortunately, for many the meaning of Christmas is Santa Clause and the giving of gifts, but the true story of Santa Claus begins with a man named **Nicholas**, who was born during the third century in modern day Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Left with his parent's wealth, he decided to obey Jesus' words to "*sell what you own and give the money to the poor.*" Nicholas used his inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering, as he dedicated the rest of his life to serving God. Nicholas was made a Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church while still a young man and became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need and for his love of children. After his death he earned sainthood and became St. Nicholas.

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and his generous deeds – from which came the modern story of Santa Clause. These stories and accounts of his life help us understand St. Nicholas' extraordinary character and why he is so beloved and revered as a helper of those in need. One particular story tells of how he helped a poor man with three unmarried daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value – known as a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. This poor man's three daughters, without dowries, were therefore destined to remain unmarried and live in poverty or be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home, providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fireplace to dry. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas which still continues today in some parts of the world.

Christmas is a stressful time when we all struggle to buy gifts for people who don't need anything – especially for our children and grandchildren who already have more than enough stuff. What can you give them that they don't already have, and something they would appreciate and treasure? During this time of the year it is

important to remember the example of St. Nicholas, who is the inspiration behind our gift exchanges and our generosity to those in need. This year as we celebrate Christmas, if we want to follow the example of St. Nicholas, possibly we should reclaim the emphasis on giving to children who are not our own, those children in our community who are needy. In the Christmas story, Joseph was a type of St. Nicholas who chose to care for, sacrifice for, protect and raise a child who was not his own!

The news that Joseph received from Mary that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit was no doubt unbelievable and devastating news – with Joseph becoming the very first person to doubt the virgin birth. As Joseph at first doubted Mary's story, many today also struggle with the difficult concept of the virgin birth, having difficulty believing Jesus is the Son of God, and was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born to a virgin 2000 years ago in the distant land of Israel. We already talked last week about the huge dilemma that Joseph faced, since the pledge or engagement to his upcoming marriage to a young girl named Mary had already been made public to family, friends and those living in his hometown of Nazareth. Now that Mary was pregnant before the marriage had taken place, a scandal had developed that could not be denied or hidden. People are going to talk; word is going to spread far-and-wide. Mary would be seen as a sinner, a harlot, and few men would ever consider marrying a woman who had cheated on her fiancée. Mary plus her whole family would carry that disgrace from then on, but that's not what Joseph wanted to happen, so he took the blame on himself, letting others think that he was the father, which all came about because of a visitation by an angel in a dream. God intervened to make sure His plan to save the world would be carried out according to plan. However, this was not the only encounter Joseph had with an angel. God would continue to send angels to Joseph for many more years to direct Joseph as he raised the Christ child!

We often think of God's messengers, His angels as winged creatures – but when we read the Bible closely, that's not how they are often portrayed. Most often in the Bible, we find that angels look like ordinary men, and that's why in the book of Hebrews, we read this warning, ***“Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”*** (Hebrews 13:2). In Luke's Gospel when Mary speaks to the angel Gabriel, he appears simply as a stranger, with no wings, or radiant light surrounding him. Then, in Joseph's encounter with an angel it was through his dreams, but it must have been so realistic that he immediately believed and was obedient to do what

the angel told him to do. It's interesting to note that in Matthew's Gospel, we are told that Joseph was visited by an angel in his dreams four times: 1) In the first dream, the angel of the Lord reveals to Joseph that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and informs him that this child is to be named "*Jesus*," and is destined to save the people from their sins; 2) In a second dream, sometime after Jesus' birth, the angel of the Lord tells Joseph to take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt because King Herod is going to search for the child to kill him; 3) In the third dream, year later, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in Egypt after Herod's death, telling him to take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel; fulfilling the prophesy, "***I will call my son out of Egypt;***" 4) In the fourth and final dream, Joseph is warned not to return to Judea; instead, go to Nazareth so that the prophesy would be fulfilled that Jesus would be called a Nazarene.

Joseph's four encounters with God's angels are all through dreams; however, in Luke's Gospel we have the account of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary face-to-face. This tells me that God can speak to us directly through a visitation by an angel, or indirectly through our dreams. Through both angel visitations and dreams God encourages us, guides us, and sometimes, like in the case of Joseph's angel helps us know God's will, and then helps us find the courage to carry it out. Have you ever encountered an angel, face-to-face or in your dreams? Have you shown hospitality to a stranger who may have been an angel sent by God? Possibly you have never encountered an angel that you can recall, but perhaps you could have been an angel for someone else, to a complete stranger who was in need. I believe that we have divine encounters all of the time, and don't realize it. I also believe that God often puts people in our path to test our faith to see if we would be an angel to them, and when we take the time to stop and help a stranger in need, we find that it brings us great joy, because serving brings joy!

Sadly, the season leading up to Christmas is anything but joyful for many. We may sing of joy on Sunday, but we don't often feel joy the rest of the week, because of all the preparations to be made, the baking, the decorating and gift purchases. And then, there are also those stressful family dynamics, much like that popular movie "*A Christmas Vacation*" with the Griswold family. We have good company during the Christmas season, because that first Christmas wasn't always joyful and ideal for Mary and Joseph either. For many, Christmas can be the most depressing time of the year, with the short daylight hours and the long cold dark nights, and the stress of the season that has gotten much worse now that we are dealing with COVID. However, we can experience joy when we take our eyes off

our own situation and focus on blessing others, encouraging others, and serving others. In that way, we can become someone's angel, bringing them love and God's good news of the birth of our Saviour, the one gift that everyone needs, whether they realize it or not!

Any Jew who heard Matthew's account of Joseph's dreams – would have thought of another **Joseph** found in the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis. This Joseph was the favoured son of another man named Jacob (which happens to be the same name as Jesus' grandfather according to Matthew's genealogy), who lived about 1600 years before the birth of Jesus. Matthew is the only Gospel writer that tells us about Joseph's four dreams, so Matthew may have been trying to make a connection between these two Josephs in which dreams played an important part of their lives. The Joseph we read about in the book of Genesis, was another man chosen by God for a great task, which was also a very difficult and challenging task. Joseph was sent by God to Egypt to save the Jewish people from starvation. God used Joseph to give the Israelites a place to live in the best land of Egypt, where they could multiply rapidly; thereby, becoming the great nation of millions that returned to the Promised Land of Israel 400 years later. This story found at the end of Genesis also shows how God can call an unlikely person in a terrible situation, a young man sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and then wrongly imprisoned in Egypt for many years, to be used to fulfill God's purposes. So, we are never to underestimate who God will call and use for a great task – God may even be calling you, right in the middle of your difficult situation, for a divine purpose!

You will also notice in the first dream that Joseph had – the angel says, ***“don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.”*** Whenever God calls us to do something and His opening words are *“Don't be afraid,”* we probably should be afraid, because God always calls us outside of our comfort zone, calling us to do something we absolutely don't want to do. The angel in this incident was telling Joseph God's plan, which not only involved the difficult mission to wed Mary and trust that the child she was carrying was not from another man, but also involved the mission of raising a child who will one day save not only Mary and Joseph, but everyone from their sins. God was saying, *“Joseph, don't be afraid, even though my salvation plan for the world is being entrusted to your care!”* So, what God was asking of Joseph was no ordinary, insignificant or small thing, but to protect, raise and nurture God's Son, so that the promised Messiah could grow up to carry out God's mission to save the world. And YES, it was scary and terrifying, but

God had chosen the right man for the job who stepped out in faith, not letting himself be sidelined because of his fears, doubts or uncertainties!

Then in Luke's Gospel, when the angel Gabriel visited Mary, we learn that she was greatly troubled by his words as well, and the angel also said to her the same words that Joseph heard, ***“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God”*** (Luke 1:30). Fear is a barrier to many of us that prevents us from fulling the calling and purposes that God has for our lives. Our enemy Satan thrives in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, causing us to doubt ourselves, thinking God could never use me! Thankfully both Joseph and Mary accepted the difficult challenge and allowed God to use them to fulfill His plan, as Mary stated in **verse 38**, ***“I am the Lord's servant...may your word to be fulfilled.”*** To deal with our fears we need to put our confidence in God, and there's no better place to get that confidence than in the joy of serving the Lord, as the Bible tells us in **Psalm 16:11**, ***“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”*** The joy of the Lord is our strength, driving out all those fears which are empowered by Satan's lies of deception to get us off track; thereby, not fulfilling God's calling on our lives!

When we can worship the Lord and focus on His goodness, regardless of whatever may be happening in our lives, we shut the door to our fears, and are filled with hope, confidence, and faith to keep moving forward. Trusting God despite our fears and saying YES to God's call even when we feel like saying NO, ultimately brings joy, the kind of joy we celebrate during the Advent season. Like Joseph and Mary, we all may have thousands of excuses to avoid what God is calling us to do, but it's by saying YES that life's greatest adventures are found, despite the anxiety we all experience in stepping out of our comfort zones and into God's plan for our lives. Remember, every great thing you'll ever be called by God to do will require RISK. RISK means stepping out in faith and leaning on God everlasting arms despite your uncertainty, inadequacy and fears!

The most challenging and frightening part of Joseph's call – was the enormous task of raising the Savior of the world. God's plan for the redemption of the world depended on one man's willingness to raise a child who was not his own. Today, there are stepparents, adoptive parents, and foster parents who would understand this role, knowing the hard work and fear involved in raising a child not your own. To them as well, God says, ***“Don't be afraid.”*** Laurie and I can relate in some way with grandchildren that we have inherited through a second marriage. It's

much more difficult to relate to these grandchildren and include them in the same way as our natural grandchildren – it’s definitely a challenge. Perhaps nowhere is the selfless, sacrificial love of God more clearly displayed than when someone takes on the task of raising and loving a child who is not biologically theirs, especially if they have special needs!

At the time Jesus was born – widows, divorced women, and single mothers, along with their children and orphan children without parents were the most vulnerable in society. Again-and-again the Scriptures call us as believers to care for the less fortunate, especially widows and orphans. For example: James writes these words, ***“The spirituality that is pure in the eyes of our Father God is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans, and widows in their troubles, and refuse to be corrupted by the worlds values”*** (James 1:27). Jesus wasn’t an orphan, but He did need an earthly father so that He wouldn’t be raised by a single parent like many children today. Not all of us are in a position to become foster or adoptive parents, but all of us are called to help, build-up and care for children that are not our own. We can make a significant difference not only in the lives of our biological children and grandchildren, but other children not our own as well, especially by passing along our spiritual values. In fact, sometimes it’s much easier to speak into the life of a child that’s not our own than one that is our own. Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, coaches of sport teams, Scout leaders, all can become role models and make a positive difference in the lives of children not their own.

As well Christmas can take on real significance – when we move beyond buying gifts for people who don’t need anything to becoming a modern-day Joseph, who looked past his fears, accepting his God given assignment to take Mary as his wife, and raise Jesus as his own son. Plus, we can also do what St. Nicholas did and look for ways to bless and care for underprivileged children and youth in our community who need our support, our love, and learn how to love and serve God by our Christian values. The challenge of Christmas is to be a modern day Joseph and modern day St. Nicholas to serve others sacrificially, because serving brings great joy!