

Simple Gifts: Peace
Matthew 1: 18-25
3rd Sunday of Advent

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We have spent Advent here at First Presbyterian exploring the simple gifts of hope and love, and this week we turn to consider God's simple gift of peace. Today my hope is that we will recognize the small and simple ways in which God works in us to make way for the peace of Christ to come into the world. My hope too is that you and I will be encouraged to choose, as Joseph did, to live our lives in faithful obedience and courageous trust no matter the cost and the sacrifice. Join me by reading along in the red pew Bible as we read Matthew's account of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1:18-25.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ^[a] took place in this way.

When his mother Mary had been betrothed^[b] to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us).

²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. **THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD. THANKS BE TO GOD.** Would you pray with me?

Lord, I ask that you use my mouth to speak and open our hearts to hear what you have prepared in your words as a light of revelation to us all. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

An old friend I knew in college tragically lost her small 5-month old baby a year ago this past week. They had gone in for what is a routine and low risk surgery for Down's Syndrome-related heart defects; but baby Julia encountered unanticipated complications. In a matter of 24 hours, she went from a recovering little baby to a life slipped away too

early, too tragically, too unexpectedly. In the midst of Advent season last year, my friend Christine writes of losing the little light of Julia. In a season of hoping for light, darkness instead engulfed their family.

A year later, still and always grieving, Christine posted a reflection this week on her journey through this first year of life without Julia. It was an honest, hopeful tearjerker. But the part of the story that grabbed my attention the most was this: She compared her husband's character in the last year to Joseph's in our text today:

“Joseph’s temperament reminds me of my husband Taylor. Joseph trusted the angel in his dream, and married Mary. He probably gave up a lot – his reputation, his cultural status, and probably endured a lot of mocking about his pregnant fiancée. Maybe he was even ostracized in his synagogue. He likely gave up so much more than we even know about in order to obey God and take care of his pregnant wife-to-be. My husband Taylor has done that this year, and last year. He has given up so much professionally and personally in order to best serve his wife and our other child. He has done so humbly and, in some cases, without a lot of explanation...He rescued me from a deep pit of despair and showed me deeply and clearly what the sacrificial love of Christ truly means.”ⁱ

What theme's in Christine's description of her husband did you hear? I heard trust, sacrifice, kindness, humility, courage, and servanthood. All for the sake of making space for the healing and peace that needs to come for Taylor's wife, their family, for him. In quiet and simple ways, Taylor has been grieving as well as setting himself aside in order to serve not only his life partner, but God's greater work in their lives and through their story of loss and hope.

The story of Joseph includes similarly quiet and simple details that actually begin a much greater story. There is not much fanfare in the text that begins as a near tragedy. The words are basic, straightforward, and Matthew evokes no overly descriptive or dramatic images one would expect. He writes as if his first readers would in many ways have been familiar with what seems to us a very spectacular and miraculous series of events. But, what reads as a common Jewish birth announcement, is actually full of details clarifying the miraculous new beginning God is offering his people. And his people begin with Joseph...

Joseph found himself in rather awkward and potentially embarrassing circumstances. His fiancée Mary was pregnant, and he was not the father. In our text, he did not yet

know the reason how or why. Now, even as a betrothed man and woman, Mary and Joseph would NOT have yet slept together. So, there was no way Mary could be pregnant by Joseph; if either of them had sexual relationships with someone else before the wedding, that would be considered adultery. For Mary to show up pregnant was worthy of public divorce and shaming. It could also cost Joseph his reputation as a law-abiding Jewish man. To put the circumstances in further perspective, Mary would have been between 12-14 and Joseph would have been between 18-20. They were young!

Caught between the “holy law of God and love for Mary,” we glimpse Joseph’s character in verse 19—Joseph would have been *required* to divorce Mary and expose her pregnancy as the reason for his action. Mary would likely never have been able to marry or find a man to take her; when her parents died, she would have had no financial support in the economic structures of the day.

So, Joseph considered his options, he took time to think about what options would bring peace for him and for Mary. He decided he would divorce out of the public eye and he would not expose her pregnancy, two actions which could potentially protect Mary from shame and scorn and a penniless life. But, his own law-abiding reputation would also be preserved. We see here that while Joseph was a just young man, he also was a compassionate young man.

But a messenger of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, a common form of revelation from God throughout Scripture. The content of the dream severely disrupts Joseph’s neatly organized plans. [as most dreams do ;)] The angel speaks specifically and directly to Joseph, calling him by his name, reminding him that he is part of a royal bloodline including King David. Then, the angel drops the bomb: “Do not be afraid. You can still take Mary as your wife. Her pregnancy is caused by the Holy Spirit; in her is the promised one who will rescue you and your people from your sin. Name him Jesus, which means ‘God who saves.’”

Now, if dreams and talking angels were commonplace modes of communication for Joseph, what *would* have been extraordinary in THIS dream? [PAUSE] The cause of Mary’s pregnancy and the identity of the baby! In no uncertain terms, what began as a simple tragedy about a spurned husband-to-be and a knocked up bride becomes a divine drama of global proportions unfolding within their family. You see, as a member of the people of Israel, Joseph would be waiting, along with everyone else, for a Messiah who would bring them out of the Roman Empire, who would defeat their physical enemies and rule on a royal throne in Jerusalem. But, in the angel’s words, the Messiah is now

coming...but nothing about political or royal upheaval and rescue and peace is mentioned. Only this: "He will save his people from their sins."

Joseph knows from his dream onward that he is being directed to not be afraid to take Mary as his already-pregnant wife. The costs of his pride and self-righteousness and reputation are on the line, but he understands what has been spoken to him. He also is being directed to not be afraid of the new way of life his people would be offered, starting with him and Mary, if they courageously admitted their sin and trusted that on the other side, a God of peace would meet them. As Joseph and his people let Christ enter into their lives, he would confront deeply personal, almost invasive, always uncomfortable presence of sin...and in it's place bring peace that Joseph could not, and we cannot create within ourselves. As Christine read at the Christmas tea, perhaps Joseph heard this prayer rising even within himself, "Save now my heart and forgive my behavior, Remove all the sin that has come with my fall, Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!"

Matthew takes a moment in his gospel to confirm the unexpected identity of the baby whom Joseph now knows about. The baby Jesus as Savior and not as King was a twist on the expectations for peace. Not only does Joseph's encounter with the angel upend his life plan...it upends the plans and expectations of his people. Perhaps, for us, the hope of peace in Christ is what we too, quite unexpectedly, have been waiting for. Do we respond to such dramatic news and an upheaval of our plans as Joseph did when "God with us" breaks through?

You see, Joseph's response to the dream is truly remarkable. No questions asked. No hesitation. In verses 24 and 25, Matthew writes: Joseph woke. Joseph did what the angel commanded. Joseph married Mary. Joseph named the son Jesus. In the span of a night, Joseph courageously trusted and faithfully obeyed the call of the Lord.

I find it to be a great challenge and remarkable accomplishment that before Jesus was even BORN, the promise and hope of his presence *immediately* changed the way Joseph chose to live. You see, Joseph was already a good man. Joseph was a just man. Joseph had a kind heart. The Scripture commends him for these things. But, he was not a new man. It is my conviction from the text that when the angel of the Lord visited him that night and asked him to set aside the consequences and stigma of actually taking Mary as his wife, Joseph responded so immediately, quickly, and simply in obedience because he recognized this was an invitation to a new way of life. Despite the consequences, despite

the costs, despite the risks, Joseph courageously trusted and faithfully obeyed, believing that on the other side, Jesus Immanuel was, quite literally, waiting for him. The voice of the angel led him to hear God's voice long enough to change his entire life...and I wonder, for myself, for you, for us, for our world...

Are we in a position to hear God's voice in our hectic lives? I was out gathering items for a party on Friday and was amazed at the craziness of traffic everywhere. The fragmentation of our lives is all around us. The press, the temptation to rush rather than rest, to drink more caffeine [myself included] than chamomile, to chock it up to the "time of year" rather than stop to ask "what is this time of year really for?", to ignore the taps of the Holy Spirit on our shoulder.

1) I wonder what might be waiting for us if we cultivate space and time to hear God's voice and respond like Joseph so readily? I wonder if our marriages would include a little less honey-do's and more hugs. I wonder if our kids would do a few less activities and find more surprising moments of wonder, awe, and discovery of God's world. I wonder if our lonely hearts would find a home in safe and vulnerable communities in which we can grow in the love, hope, peace, and joy of Christ? I wonder if the bricks, mortar, and investments we build up around ourselves to protect from risk and give us "security" would pale in comparison to the peace of walking with God.

ILL: I was recently talking with a family member who confessed, You know, for twenty years I have been running from God's voice and God's call. But I've started meeting with a life coach at church, and well, I'm asking what it's going to look like at even my age to start trusting and being faithful? When we attend to God's voice, all kinds of disruptions can happen.

2) I wonder too what it would like if we were honest with ourselves about sinful habits, patterns, or even attitudes [and Lord knows I have a LOT of this one!] which we allow to run our lives rather than hope for a new life, a new way. I wonder if we stopped avoiding our need for a Savior and started embracing it if we might become more loving, more kind, more faithful, more peaceful...recognizing that in the end, we just might not have it all together and as Anne Lamott says, We need HELP! that only Jesus can give.

To be honest, as I thought a couple of weeks ago about preparing this sermon, I was pretty ambivalent about Joseph, and about peace, frankly, about this first story of Jesus

coming into the world. Part of my attitude was due in great part to the violent and terrifying image of Eric Garner being strangled to death on the sidewalk of New York City forever burned into my mind's eye. That image has shaped this year's Advent. But, my ambivalence about this story, Joseph, and peace was in many ways an effect of my missing something so significant. I forgot the center around which Joseph's decisions were made. I forgot that the center were the words of a promised Messiah filling his wife's womb. I forgot that the center was the hope of a baby called Jesus coming into the world to actually rescue his people, and us, from sins like selfishness, deceit, and pride which could have prevented Joseph's courageous choice. I forgot that Jesus entered this world, to be God with us, that we are not abandoned to our personal sins or left alone fighting injustice. I forgot that because Christ became "God with us," we all are offered the choice of a new beginning and a new hope that in fact, because Christ offers himself as our Savior we may have peace. For most of Advent, I had my eyes off the ball, off the end game, off the hope that the world as is is not the world God intends. A man strangled on the sidewalk, or a kid shot in the street, or a small baby dying tragically and traumatically—and parents left to make sense of it all—these are not the signs of peace God intended. What, I cried, DID God intend? Where is the peace of Christ?

I asked God to show me what signs of Christ's peace exist and testimonies of people slowing down to let God in. Where has the Spirit of God tapped on ordinary people, given them a new dream, and called them to choose faithful obedience and courageous trust? Where are the Joseph's, much like the young husband Taylor, who quietly and humbly point us toward Christ's presence and peace trying to break through? The signs have been compelling...and humbling.

- First I listened to Rafael, a student at Lake Forest College dreaming his campus can learn from and grow in the midst of racist words being spoken on social media. As he gathered faculty, students, and administrators for a conversation on Race on campus this week, he ended with the words, "Oh, and I'm a man of prayer so if anyone wants to pray about this, I'm available."
- Then there was a Latina senior, dreaming to become a lawyer so one day she can represent folks like her undocumented parents desiring the dignity of citizenship. Her final explanation for such a dream? "I'm a Christ-centered woman, and following him is the best," she spoke with tears in her eyes as her heart of compassion overflowed.

- A freshman sharing about her Tutsi mother extending kindness and forgiveness to her Hutu neighbors, even though her mother's family was killed by Hutu's in the Rwandan genocide and her army husband was murdered in one of Congo's wars. How did this young student describe her mother? "As a God-fearing, wise woman. I want to be like her."
- And, finally, my friend Daniel, a hard-core partier frat boy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he encountered God's upending peace during his college days. Invited into a new way of life, he now lives, works, and loves well in North Chicago. He has chosen a life of simplicity, almost of poverty, and of obedience to be a good neighbor. He has no air of self-righteousness about himself; he is a humble, quiet, thoughtful man who comes as an agent of peace and a partner with pastors and churches building unity and Christ-centered witness. He has given up a lot so that Christ's peace indeed might be known and trusted.

These are four simple stories of young people, not old wise folks, but young folks, about the same age as Joseph, who have trusted that the promise of Christ's salvation and peace is in fact our great hope. Like Joseph, their lives open the way for the much greater life to come, the life of peace lived in relationship with Jesus. May we this week practice noticing the presence of God who is with us. May we recognize our sins, and humbly admit, we need the help of the promised Savior. And may we courageously trust and faithfully obey the voice of the Holy Spirit, however risky the call. Amen.

ⁱ <http://juliachristinesheart.blogspot.com/2014/12/one-year-later.html>