

November 29, 2009

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Journey Toward the Light
“The Journey of Joseph: Trust”
Matthew 1.18-25

The poet Ann Weems said, “The Christmas Spirit is that hope which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce, and all the Inn doors slammed in our faces, and all the dark nights of our souls...that with God all things still are possible, that even now unto us a child is born!”

Who couldn't use the gift of a good dose of hope to tenaciously cling to your heart this Christmas?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Our Advent theme is Journey Toward the Light. We're going to explore the journeys of the different characters in the Christmas story and see how their story might reflect our story...how their journeys might speak to our journey. As we travel with them, something new might be born in us.

The chances are pretty good that most of us know the basics of the Christmas story pretty well...and what a glorious story it is... A couple, Mary and Joseph, who courageously made their way to Bethlehem with Mary about to give birth;

A radiant star shining brightly in the night; angels filling the sky with song; cows and sheep, tamed by the moment, seeming to understand the need for silence and awe; proud parents eagerly showing off their newborn baby to delighted shepherds; Wise Men proclaiming the birth of a King.

Glorious, isn't it? A calm, peaceful, beautiful Christmas-card perfect scene...right? Well, maybe not. There's the sentimental romanticized version of Christmas and there's the real Christmas.

We forget sometimes that the Christmas story as it was told to us was less than ideal. It was anything but perfect. In fact, it was a real mess...full of confusion and fear...full of uncertainty and the unexpected. My guess is that most of us can relate to the mess more than we can relate to the Christmas-card perfect version of the story. At least I can!

During this Advent season, as we look each week at some of the characters in the story..Joseph, Mary, the Shepherds, the Wise Men...we're going to try to separate them from the sentimental Christmas card and allow them to become more human...seeing if our story might somehow connect to their story.

There is no doubt we live in an age where fear has a firm grip on many people's lives. And if we're honest fear controls many of our decisions. We might feel our lives being led in a particular direction but fear has a nasty habit of pulling us back.

Have you noticed in the telling of the Christmas story, everywhere we turn an angel sneaks up on some unsuspecting soul scaring the living daylights out of them inviting them to trust saying "FEAR NOT!"

An angel came to Mary and said, "Don't be afraid!" Next thing you know Mary's life is turned upside down and is a real mess – she's pregnant, but the father is not her beloved Joseph...some crazy story about "bearing God's child" is the only explanation offered.

This was certainly not the life plan she had in mind. How could you possibly “Fear not?” And what about good ‘ol Joseph? We’re not told a whole lot about Joseph.

I imagine the future was looking good for Joseph. His life was going according to schedule. He had worked for several years as an apprentice and learned his trade as a craftsman. He could take a piece of wood and transform it into something useful or beautiful. He might never be rich but he would put food on the table. He was well respected around town and an active member of the local synagogue.

He recently became engaged to a fine young woman named Mary. God willing, they would make a home, raise a family, grow old together in the same village with their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. Life would be predictable but solid. Weekly Sabbath prayers and dinners.

And, then, everything changed...became a mess! His fiancé is pregnant and he’s not the father. His trust is betrayed. His name is tarnished. His heart is broken. He’s angry. He doesn’t understand. Joseph certainly didn’t expect this. His dream regarding his future with Mary shattered.

My guess is that more than a few know what it’s like to have your dream shattered...your life turned upside down...everything a mess! A relationship ends – a job is lost – diagnosis is made – a dream dies. What now? It’s hard to make sense of things. That’s when fear often takes control.

Matthew says Joseph is a good man, and even though he’s humiliated and angry, he apparently cares so much about Mary that he decides to quietly undo the betrothal contract. To try to prevent her from further shame.

And then the dreams start, the feverish tossing and turning, the images...Mary, a baby...a voice saying, “ Don’t be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary for your wife. For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Holy cow, if you ask me, a dream like that would be all the more reason to take off and run the other way.

I can imagine Joseph bolting upright in bed, in a cold sweat after being told his fiancé is pregnant, and not by him, but he should marry her anyway.

One of the quiet miracles in this whole story is that on the basis of that dream, Jacob wakes and there is something deep inside of him...a deep intuitive knowing that gives him the courage to go against every ounce of his common sense...there is something deep inside of him that gives him the courage to set aside his offended pride, his anger, his fear...and Joseph marries his pregnant fiancé.

The sentimental, romantic version of this story shows this as a piece of cake for Joseph, has him totally understanding and trusting this dream and never for a minute doubting. I’m not so sure. That’s a Joseph I couldn’t relate to.

I like to think that every day Joseph had to quiet his fear and listen for that deeper inner voice...every day he had to struggle with his feelings of betrayal and forgive all over again...every day he had to pray for that strand of faith to be increased...every day he had to summon the courage to go on and trust in spite of his doubts and fears and uncertainty. Every day he probably wondered, “God, this mess can’t be what you had in mind for my life?”

As Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem, think about how frightened they must have been.

There's a tendency to tell the Christmas story as if there are no surprises...as if Mary and Joseph knew exactly what's going on. They didn't know what was going on in Bethlehem any more than we know what is going on in our lives. Amazingly, they mustered up the courage and faith to surrender their lives to this mystery and they trusted. They choose love over fear.

As they continued their journey, they were a long way from home, no motel reservations, a dirty old barn, excruciating contractions – so very alone. What a mess!

Nothing sweet and sentimental about any of this. This was certainly not the life plan either of them had in mind. They had to place the child in an animal feeding trough...rough...full of splinters...dry, prickly hay for a blanket.

This is their journey toward the light. We tidy up this story so much for the beautiful Christmas cards and the Christmas pageants that the pain and the mess and the uncertainty and the fear get completely erased.

We miss something very important when the mess and the pain and the fear are erased.

I can imagine Joseph praying, 'You know, God, this isn't the way I imagined my life, but I listened. I trusted. And here we are in a smelly stable with my wife giving birth with only the stars in the sky to hear her pain.'

I can imagine Joseph praying, "God, what are you doing with my life? Did I miss something?"

I suspect we've all stood where Joseph was standing wondering whether we've missed something, wondering what God is doing

with our lives, wondering if there is some plan for our lives we can't see...I suspect we've all asked once or twice on our journey, "God, where are you in this mess?"

Yes, we miss something very important in the journey when the mess and the pain and the fear are erased. For the mess becomes the very place where God shows up and Christ is born.

It is right there in the midst of the mess and pain and fear that God's love is born...that a light pierces the darkness...that's where God shows up...that's where God's love is born...in the mess...that's where the light of God's love shines the brightest...in the dark places.

I remember a man whose wife died, leaving him with a small son. Back home from the cemetery, they went to bed early because there was nothing else he could bear to do.

As he lay there in the darkness, heart broken and grief stricken, he was jolted by a question from his young son who was stretched out beside him. "Daddy, when is Mommy coming back?" The father tried to answer out of his own agony, but the boy still seemed disturbed.

Finally, the little boy said, "Daddy, if your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep." The father turned his face to the little boy and in a little while he drifted off to sleep.

The father lay there in the darkness and then he lifted up his own broken heart to God and prayed, "Oh God, the way is dark, I confess right now I don't see the way ahead...I can't see my way through; but if your face is toward me, I know I can make it." That's it...that no matter what happens in this life...no matter how messy life can get...the mystery and wonder of this story is the

invitation to trust that in the birth of Jesus, God turned His face toward us, and it is the face of love.

Faithful courage, like the courage we see in Joseph, is not the absence of fear. It is the willingness to trust, to act, to follow, to be, to love, in the face of fear.

Sometime in the days ahead as we journey toward the light, listen to that whisper in your soul and remember, 'Don't be afraid...God has turned his face toward you and it is the face of love.'

May you catch that Christmas Spirit which is that hope which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce, and all the Inn doors slammed in our faces, and all the dark nights of our souls, that with God all things still are possible, that even now unto us a child is born!