

December 6, 2020 The Reluctant Servant Matthew 1:18-25

Dearly Beloved;

In 2020, in the midst of the 2nd wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic, things can turn on a dime. Shortly after I wrote last week, and posted both the script of the sermon, and the video, the status of Prince Edward-Hastings changed. An outbreak in cases in Belleville, and additional cases in the region caused our area to move to yellow. In light of the breaking news, the Session and I decided to rule that services of worship are suspended to the end of 2020. Our concern has continued to be to keep you as safe as we possibly can. It is Saturday morning, December 5th and I have just heard Public Health reminding us that the virus is transmitted person to person. That is why we will not be meeting in December. Knowing that, I am also able to send you this note saying that I will be continuing to post sermons on the web page of the church with a link, for those who are computer literate, to a reading of the message from the dining room table here at 24 Sherwood Crescent. I will be lighting the Advent Candles, and celebrating communion. Join me with a piece of bread, or a cracker, juice, water, or wine. On the 24th of December I will be putting up a Christmas Eve devotional. You will recall we made the decision much earlier in the Fall not to have a Christmas Eve Service at the Church this year because it is one of those times when attendance blooms, and it would simply be difficult to do things safely. This opportunity to do something via the internet is great for those who have the capacity. Unfortunately some of our most faithful, and elderly members will not be able to

partake in it. On the other hand, there are viewers who make use of what we are doing from different parts of the province. Please stay as safe as possible this Christmas and New Year. And yes, that means I am begging you to stay home. Vaccines are in the works. And better times are coming. The Lord bless you in the midst of a world that must socially isolate.

Morley Mitchell

We have been looking at the servants of God involved in the birth of Jesus. We began with Isaiah the prophet who foretold the 1st Christmas centuries before it occurred. He volunteered to serve God, the willing servant. On Advent 1, last Sunday we turned to Mary, the obedient servant of God. She obeyed God, and at the same time she asked questions, and was afraid, and had doubts. That means our obedience to God and HIS will for us, is not sullied by our questioning, doubting or fearful moments.

This morning we turn to Joseph. He is the reluctant servant of God. Matthew tells us the wedding for Mary and Joseph had been arranged. Plans had been finalized. And then it became clear Mary was going to have a baby. She claims it is a child of the Spirit of God. Joseph was a righteous man. (Matthew 1:19) That means he was committed to doing things the right way, God's way. He did not believe her. He was not a man to believe in miracles. As a result he calls the whole thing off. I find it encouraging that such a crucial figure in the development of Jesus has a problem with the idea of a miraculous pregnancy, leading to a miraculous birth. Joseph

does not want to “harm Mary,” to expose her to public scorn and even death. So he just cancels the contract and walks away. He is not going to marry Mary.

It is God HIMSELF who intervenes. Joseph has a miracle of his own. In a dream, while he is sleeping, an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him, Mary has told him the truth. What is happening is not of her making; it is of God, and Joseph has a part to play in God’s plan to save people like you and me and Joseph, from our sinfulness. Very religious Joseph, is told that Isaiah has foretold this moment...”a virgin will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us.” Isaiah 7:14 is quoted to Joseph in the dream by the angel of the Lord.

That experience changes everything. “When Joseph woke up he did what the angel had commanded him.” He married Mary. He became the loving father of Jesus, and a number of other children, including the disciple named James. Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem and registered as part of the great Census called for by the Roman Caesar, Augustus. Joseph did what a Jewish father would do, he named his son, his first born son according to the revelation in the dream. He called the baby Jesus. He was born in the stable because the Inn was filled to capacity with travelers doing what Joseph was doing. And the shepherds came in from the fields and told their amazing story. And a year or more later, the Magi arrived and found them in a house in Bethlehem. You know the story.

When I was a boy and television was new in Port Arthur, we watched a program that was extremely special. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, (Roman Catholic) would talk every Saturday evening and write notes on a blackboard. At the top of the blackboard he would always begin by writing JMJ...Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The perfect servant of God, the obedient servant of God and the reluctant servant of God. The adjectives are accurate, but so are the words servant of God! Mary doubted she could become pregnant without a husband. Joseph decided that based on his religious convictions he would not participate in life with Mary. The Lord sends angels, and the Savior of the world is born in Bethlehem.

The amazing thing about Christmas is the number of people who would not say they believe any of this, decorate their homes, exchange gifts in imitation of the Wise Men, and feast with their loved ones. And our minds and souls really protest the fact that we need to mute our celebrating this year. Not at the church with the piano and organ and the choir, simply, if not quietly in our homes. Christmas is not a magical season. It is a miraculous season. It grips our souls often in spite of what we are convinced we think or do not believe. That is a bond we share with Mary and with Joseph too.

In the Advent section of the Book of Praise there is a hymn called "Hope IS A Star." When God is a child, there is joy in our song/The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong/ And none shall be afraid." That is part of the legacy to us from Joseph. He had good reasons to be reluctant. And he had one

reason not to be afraid. He gets to hold the new born baby and he gets to name HIM, Jesus.

May God bless us that we too would overcome our fears as we prepare for and celebrate the birth of the baby in Bethlehem.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, we can all think of reasons why this Christmas will not be like the other Christmas's we have known. We are tempted to focus on what we will not be able to do, and people with whom we will not be able to meet. Give us the joy that only YOU can pour into our song. We are weak and we tend to want to dwell on our weakness. Make us strong in Christ Jesus, by the means of YOUR Spirit. Touch us with the power of saving grace, that none might be afraid. Amen