

## **THE JOURNEY CONTINUES**

**MATTHEW 2:13-23**

**MAPLE GROVE UMC**

**DECEMBER 29, 2019**

God was walking through Heaven one day talking to Moses. Along the way they ran into George HW Bush. Moses abruptly turned and walked the other way which puzzled God. Later God observed Moses do the same thing, which was totally out of character, because Moses was a friendly fellow. The third time God saw Moses do this, God knew he had to do something. He went to Moses and asked him why he was ignoring George. Moses replied "Last time I talked to a Bush, I ended up wandering in the desert for 40 years."

This year the lectionary scriptures go through the book of Matthew. It is a little more difficult than other gospels because it is not written as a chronological account of Jesus's life. The book of Matthew was written by Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples. But before this he was a Jewish tax collector. He wrote this account of Jesus' life and ministry with the intended audience of the Jewish community to prove the Jesus was the awaited Messiah. It is filled with Messianic language such as "son of David" throughout. In this book there are 53 Old Testament quotes and 75 other references. So with this lens let's look at our gospel lesson for today.

Poor Mary and Joseph, the twists and turns that we have already heard in their story. They were planning to get married and Joseph was building his carpentry business and settling down. Then, Mary barely a teenager ends up pregnant, Joseph at a cross roads as to what to do with a pregnant fiancé. And Then Emperor Augustus issues a decree for a census and they have to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. This was a distance of about 90 miles and in todays timing would take 2.5 hours by car per Google Maps.

We all know the story, there was no car only riding a side saddle donkey for 9 month pregnant Mary. Anyone who has been pregnant

or known anyone pregnant knows that at 9 months, 90 miles in a car, let alone a donkey would be daunting. But we know from Luke 1:38 that Mary said "Here I am Lord, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". Mary was willing to pay the price to follow God's will.

We pick up today's passage that Janet read for us after the magi had visited [although that will be the scripture for next week, if you want to read ahead]. Jesus is now around 2 years old and Joseph is again messaged in a dream that they must escape to Egypt. He had to think Here we go again. but he had the very expensive gifts from the magi to use as currency for the trip and to get established in Egypt. But let's be honest has anybody ever traveled with a 2yo?

Egypt seems like a strange place for our family to be sent but that is because we see it from present day time and perspective. Two thousand years ago, Egypt was a Roman province where Greek was spoken, and it wasn't all that far away from Bethlehem, about 60 miles, but still politically outside the reach of Herod.

I bet you thought I wouldn't come back to Moses but if we look closer, it is a reversal of the Moses story. Jesus is making the same trip the people of Israel made. The Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt to find sanctuary in the wilderness and our holy family escaped TO Egypt. It also echoes the story of OT Joseph taking God's people to Egypt to escape the famine. In these stories, the place of sanctuary is an unknown place, an unexpected place to find safety.

Despite being overwhelmed by the events of the past 2-3 years, Mary and Joseph show us lives of trust in God, even when the outcome seems uncertain, scary, unwanted or down right impossible.

It isn't just a story of travel but This is also a story of journey of faith. Too often we see the Christmas texts as a story of Mary's trust in God, but I think we give Joseph the short end of the stick. No words

of Joseph are recorded in the Bible. Even though he is silent in scripture and seems to be the forgotten member of the Christmas story, Joseph is a shining example of trust in God's protective care.

Nothing in our lives [or at least nobody that I have ever met] has a faith that started when they were a babe in arms, and steadily grew to complete perfection throughout their life. Our faith journey or life journey is never a straight line. Just like there are turns in the roads we travel, I believe there are also turns and detours of our faith.

Think about all that Joseph was asked to do. Joseph listened to God when he was told not to dismiss a pregnant Mary. He listened when his government rulers told him to travel a crazy long distance just for a census. Then he becomes the adoptive father of the savior of the world. And now God tells him to take his wife and young son to a strange land where he had no job or home.

Then after a time angels tell him to take his family to Israel because those that are trying to take Jesus's life are dead. But wait ... that's not all ... Verse 22 tells us: "Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and went and lived in a town called Nazareth." Now ... I do not know about you, but I seriously think that I would, somewhere along the line have questioned God. Or wonder if this even God's voice I was hearing?

I imagine that God's commands didn't make perfect sense to Joseph. I think I might have offered God a few alternative plans. Maybe "Ok, God your plan sounds like a good one, but we have already traveled a lot, so I think we will just go hide out at a relative's house, instead of going to Egypt."

Or we could complain "Look God, I didn't ask to be the adoptive father of this Christ Child. How about you take care of Herod because I'm just not going to Egypt." But we all know the rest of the story, and the part that Joseph played in our salvation...

Keeping Jesus safe. He trusted God's care and displayed a faith that listened.

I think this is perhaps the important lesson in Joseph's part of the story. He trusted God's care with A FAITH THAT LISTENED. Although we usually don't have angels coming to us in dreams we do have the stories recorded in the Bible to use as an example. They have the recorded lives of simple people of faith and how God guided their lives ... even when they didn't make the right choice.

We have Jonah who didn't want to go to Ninivah and ended up swallowed by a whale, but spit out 3days later ... Peter who denied Christ, but upon whom the church was built. David and his "dalliance" [as my Nanny would call it] who was the ancestor of Jesus. And who can forget poor Job, who actually listened and had everything taken away, but never gave up his faith. These are just a few of the stories that are there upon which we can use as examples for trusting God's guidance and protection.

Of course there are going to be times in our lives when God's commands might not seem to make sense or fit what we want. Will we still listen? Will we like Joseph receive the commands and promises of God with a believing heart? Perhaps that is the most unbelievable thing for me, is that what God asks of us and what God promises contain the power to move us to obey and believe.

So often our lives feel like we are wandering, sometimes with a clear direction, and others in a direction that we didn't plan what-so-ever. I know this from my own life. I was going about my career job in medical research and data management, and also working here at MG as Director of Christian Education. I was 9 months pregnant with Connor (27 years ago) and I figured there was no better time to do a children's message dressed as Mary right here on these steps

While I was telling the children about this amazing gift, Kate Morgan looked up at me and said, "Miss Michelle you mean God loves ME that

much?" My heart and soul melted on the spot. I knew there was something in that moment, but I couldn't define it. And so I listened. Well I now know that was my call to Ministry.

When I went for ordination the first time, I was denied. Part of the action plan for a year class in chaplaincy. The experiences there helped form in me a deep passion for walking along side the sickest and dying patients and a love for chaplaincy. A year later I never expected to be divorced and a single mother of two children, and when I let the staff parish chair of the church where I was Associate Pastor know this, I was told to go find another job.

Fast forward, I have been appointed back here at MG for the past 10 years have been appointed by the Bishop as your Deacon In Residence, completed my training and now Board Certified as a hospice Chaplain. Friends these are journeys I could never what so ever imagine and their events surrounding these life changes are never something I would have asked for and in reality would never have said I wanted. But I can now see that through all the unexpected twists of my life, God was with me even if I didn't feel it. God guided my journey and still does each and every day.

I want to make a clear distinction here ... in the theology according to Michelle. I DO NOT believe that God causes bad things to happen, so that God can help us to learn lessons or turn us in a different direction. I am in ministry because I listened and followed after I gave up my career job. I gave it up because my first born baby was desperately ill and tried to die as several points in that first couple years. In so doing, I could concentrate on my job here at MG and found a deep love. But NEVER will I or can I say that God caused Connors illness to move me into ministry. It did give me the time to listen to where God was leading me.

The best "little read" for me is a book by Adam Hamilton, simply titled "Why?" In it he talks about how bad stuff just happens in this world

of ours. People around us make bad choices that affect our lives. We are not caring for this earth and so natural disasters happen, illness happens and loved ones die. These are not things caused by God, but God can use the bad things in life for good, if we are willing to listen and trust.

God used my tiny sick baby [caused by an illness he picked up in day care at 6 weeks]. By leaving my career job, focusing on the work here and my moment on these steps, I was able to see ministry was the next step in my journey. God didn't cause it, but God used it, because in all the confusion, tears and uncertainty, I ultimately listened to the next great thing God was going to do in my life. It was NOT easy, but over time, it worked.

Driving this week I was listening to The River and I heard a song by the group Unspoken titled Reason. It fits perfectly today as we think about how our life and faith journey will continue starting today.

This year's felt like four seasons of winter  
And you'd give anything you think to feel the sun  
Always reaching always climbing  
Always second guessing the timing  
But God has a plan a purpose in this  
You are His child so don't you forget  
He put that hunger in your heart  
He put that fire in your soul  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing  
When you feel like giving up  
When you feel like giving in  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing  
If we could pull back the curtain of Heaven  
We would see His hand on everything  
Every hour every minute every second He's always been in it  
Don't let a shadow of a doubt take hold

Hold on to what you already know  
He put that hunger in your heart  
He put that fire in your soul  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing  
When you feel like giving up  
When you feel like giving in  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing  
He's the peace in the madness  
That you can't explain  
He's the hope in the heartbreak  
The rest in the suffering  
He's closer than the air you breathe  
From the start to the end to the in between  
Don't you dare doubt even for a minute  
What He started in you  
He's gonna finish  
He put that hunger in your heart  
He put that fire in your soul  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing  
When you feel like giving up  
When you feel like giving in  
His love is the reason  
To keep on believing

It's all about God's love for each of us. And speaks to protection in our life. And it is also what John Wesley called prevenient grace. That is the grace that goes before us. God is always there, always watching over us whether we are propelled in a direction we never expected ... whether we do not feel God's presence, cannot find God ... or when life goes right and our faith is strong.

The Old Testament lesson that Janet read for us, Jeremiah 29: 10-14 contains my life verse. The one that I have read and recited over and over thousands of times when life took roads I didn't expect, when my faith felt weak and I could not figure out which way to turn toward God. The NRSV says *"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."* This verse #11 is my life verse. Listen to it again in a different translation ... and like Mary ponder it in your heart and like Joseph listen. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Thanks be to God, the one that is always with us as our life and faith journey continues until we reach our ultimate destination of eternal life in God's presence.