

Wesley United Methodist Church
Advent 2 – Dec. 4, 2016
Text: Luke 1:26-38
Matthew 1:18-25
Title: Sacred People

Today is the second Sunday in Advent and we continue to try to pay attention to seeing the sacred in the middle of all the busyness around us. We have just heard the story of how Mary and Joseph first heard about Jesus birth. We heard their perfectly normal human reactions. “How can this be, I am not married” and Joseph, knowing that he could not possibly be the father, trying to decide what to do. We heard the angel telling Mary not to be afraid and then telling Joseph also not to be afraid but to go ahead and marry Mary anyway because her child would save his people. By the way, have you noticed that in scripture, frequently the message from an angel is “Do not be afraid.” When, in your life, has one of God’s angels, or one of God’s messengers, whispered to you, “Do not be afraid.”

Most of us have probably heard this story so many times that we tend to become immune to how really scandalous and incredible all this is. In our current culture, it is not at all unusual for babies to be born out of wedlock and for couples to frequently live together before or instead of marriage but that was not the case in the culture in which Mary and Joseph lived. They were engaged and in their culture, that was almost the same as being married. Violations of the marriage covenant carried serious consequences.

The likely penalty that Mary faced for being pregnant was death by stoning. Knowing this, think for a minute about how incredibly difficult it was for her to respond to the angel, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it happen as you have said.”

I had never noticed this before, but as I read the scripture again yesterday, I realized that Joseph already knew that Mary was pregnant before the angel came to him in a dream. It seems that Mary having not only been courageous enough to tell the angel to let it happen must have then gone to tell Joseph. Imagine how difficult that must have been for her. She went to tell the man who at that moment held the power of have her killed. It says a lot about Joseph that he could see past what must have felt to him like betrayal and to make the most humane decision available to him to quietly divorce her and not bring her to public shaming and death.

Mary and Joseph were both called to trust God, to trust that something that went so completely against the social and moral norm of their society and expectation could be used by God to bring about the most incredible change for the world. When we are faced with the unexpected, when we can't see how things can possibly work out in a positive way, are we able to trust that God can work even in the most difficult times, in spite of the most horrible things, to bring good out of tragedy and hope out of chaos?

It says a lot about how God works that rather than compelling anyone to do something, there is always a choice. Joseph could have become angry and in the norm of his culture, he could have had Mary put to death. But he didn't. We, too, always have a choice about how we are going to respond to whatever is happening around us; whether that is in our personal lives or in our community, country, or world. We may not be able to control events or other people, but we can always control and are always responsible for our own response. Are we willing to trust the messengers, the angels, from God who tell us, "Do not be afraid"? Are we willing to take

whatever actions God is calling us to so that God's love, hope, peace, compassion, can be manifest in our lives and in our world?

I imagine that Joseph while feeling betrayed and probably angry at what he believed to be Mary's actions, might still have been feeling pretty good about himself that he was taking the high road by sparing her life, by choosing to quietly dismiss her. Sometimes, we, too can feel that we have done the right thing by not doing something that would inflict more harm or hurt.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached and followed three simple rules. First, "Do no harm." This is what Joseph was doing at this point. He was doing no harm, by deciding to quietly dismiss Mary, to allow her to live.

Wesley's second rule was "Do good." I think we see this when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Further, he was also to name the baby Jesus which means "Jehovah saves." For Joseph, it also meant that he was claiming Jesus as his son, and incorporating him legally into King David's genealogy. Not only was Joseph to "do no harm" but he was also to "do good", to go beyond passively allowing something to happen, but also to act positively so that something even greater could happen.

The third rule that Wesley talked about was "Stay in love with God." Both Mary and Joseph have shown this by their response to the angel, their willingness to do what God was asking them to do, in spite of what it might mean to them personally.

I believe that the scriptural accounts of Mary and Joseph tell us a lot about how God works. If we were planning for Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph are not the most likely candidates for the role of his earthly parents

but then again, God's work often upsets comfortable social expectations and conventions. We sometimes forget this when we think about our own expectations of life and of Christmas specifically.

Many of us have come to expect the Norman Rockwell or Hallmark Christmas and measure our own against that ideal. When we do that, we often find that our experience doesn't measure up to that ideal. Maybe it should be a wake-up call to us that the first Christmas was far from that ideal of the "perfect Christmas".

I would invite us to really think about Mary and Joseph and the other people in the Bible. I think that their stories remind us that God works through the most unexpected people – and that includes us. I think that their stories remind us that all of God's people are "sacred people" and that includes us.

Earlier in the passage from Matthew, we have the genealogy of Jesus. Included in that genealogy are five women – and to include women in any kind of rendering like that in this time would be more than unusual. Those 5 women include Rahab a prostitute, Ruth a foreigner immigrant, Tamar a woman of shady reputation and Bathsheba. Included in this list are heroes of the faith, very ordinary people, and some evil people. God seems to be able to work through all different kinds of people.

The first visitors to see Jesus were shepherds – hard working people who were often considered outcasts in 1st Century Palestine – not the sort of idealized image we think of when we put out our nativity sets. Later, he was visited by the magi – probably not royal kings but other foreigners around whom many legends have grown.

Jesus' disciples were not the upper crust aristocracy. They were not generally the wealthy or people of great influence and power, but rather

they were hard working fishermen and laborers. Throughout Scripture we hear of God working in amazing ways through people who would often be described as the last, the lost and the least. All of these are sacred people to God. All of these are people just like us, but people through whom God brought about amazing things. Unexpected people and unexpected things can often be wonderful signs that God is at work.

Think about some of the most unexpected people or things in your life that may have surprised you, maybe even frustrated or angered you but that later looking back you could see God at work.

Neither Mary nor Joseph had any idea where all of this would take them. They did not know the journey that Jesus would face. Mary did not know the pain that would pierce her heart. They did not know where God would take them, but they knew that something was happening and that God was calling them to be open to the future and to follow. Both of them did as the angel asked. Mary agreed to give birth to Jesus. Joseph took Mary as his wife, named the baby Jesus, and fulfilled the scripture that the Messiah would be a descendant of the house of David not by blood, but by the adoption and faithful response of Joseph. Both of them were willing to trust God and to go wherever God was leading them. Are we willing to trust God? Are we willing to go wherever God is calling and leading us?

Are we willing to be the sacred people that God is calling us to be? Are we willing and are we able to see the sacred possibilities in each other?

When we look around ourselves can we see the image of God in the people we meet? Think about some of the places where you have seen sacred people in your daily lives. I see sacred people teaching Sunday School classes in this church and in many others. I see sacred people

lifting their voices in song helping to invite others into the experience of the sacred. I see sacred people vacuuming, cooking, serving and doing a thousand other things in their daily lives that show and share God's love in big and small ways. I see sacred people raising money to help schools in Liberia. I see sacred people stocking shelves at a food pantry. I see sacred people collecting gifts for those in need. I see sacred people loving their children and grandchildren and trying to create a world of love and safety for them. I see teachers dedicated to sharing a vision of a world where we see everyone as a child of God. Everywhere I look I see sacred people living their daily lives trying to be faithful to the God who has called each and every one of us in many different ways.

As I read and listen to the news, I see people created in the image of God. I see people who are faithful about following God and trying to live into that spark of God within them. I see people who are hurt in deep ways and do not know that God loves them and who strike out at others to hurt them. I see people who are struggling to put food on their tables and people who do not have tables on which to put the food even if they had some. I see people who are grieving and who desperately need to know and feel the peace that only God can give. All of these are sacred people, created in the image of God whether they know it or not. All of these are sacred people created in the image of God whether we can see them that way or not.

During this Advent season, we continue to seek the sacred in the middle of the busyness of our daily lives and the celebrations around us. Let us look for the sacred in each person around us and let us also look for the sacredness, the image of God, in each of us. I encourage each of us to

be open to the places where angels may be speaking in our lives and calling us to trust, to step out in faith and to not be afraid.

Especially when our Christmases are real and not like the Norman Rockwell or Hallmark ideal I pray that we will be compassionate and kind to those who most need this. I pray that we will not only “do no harm” but that we will also “do good” and “stay in love with God”. I pray that in big and small ways, we will share God’s love in the places where God calls us to be present.