

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 22, 2019
Theme: Are We There Yet? Trust
Title: Learning to Trust in the Journey
Scripture: Isaiah 7L10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

Undoubtedly you've heard it said, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." Particularly when my children were young, I frequently amended that to say, "The best laid plans of mice, men, and mothers often go astray." That reflected a normal reality for me as a mom that whatever I planned could get changed at a moment's notice when a child became ill, forgot something important, decided not to cooperate, or This is so common for us that it has also been said that there is another saying that "If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans."

Sometimes – or maybe often – life just doesn't go the way we plan. That doesn't mean we shouldn't make plans, or set goals, but it also means that sometimes we just have to accept that there will be changes to what we plan.

Joseph probably thought his life was making sense. He was engaged to Mary and anticipated they would be married, probably have children and have a good life together. Imagine his surprise when he learned that Mary was pregnant – and he knew that he was not the father of her child. Mary had also had to face that her plans for a quiet life with Joseph would not go as she planned. Mary had been visited by an angel who told her that she would conceive and bear a child by the Holy Spirit. She was to name him Jesus and he would be called "the Son of the Most High." After questioning the angel how this could happen, Mary accepted

the invitation to be in partnership with God and to bear this child. Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”

Luke’s gospel tells us that Mary went to the home of her relative Elizabeth who immediately affirmed what Mary had been told. “Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” After spending about three months with Elizabeth, Mary returned home and now it was time to face Joseph, whose plans were also about to go astray.

We often learn a lot about a person when they face a sudden dramatic unexpected change in their life. That’s when our defenses get stripped away and we respond out of our gut – out of our instincts, out of our emotions. We never really know how we are going to handle something life changing and sudden until it happens.

We learn that Joseph is a righteous man, a kind man who was concerned about someone other than himself. He must have assumed, believed, that Mary had been unfaithful to him. Betrothal or engagement in Joseph’s culture was a legally binding contract; so to break the engagement also involved a legal action of a form of divorce

He could have gone public with what he believed had happened and in doing so he could have saved his reputation but ruined Mary’s. But his immediate instinct was to handle it quietly and not to embarrass and ruin Mary. He was planning to walk away. He was planning to say no to his marriage, no to this wild story. He wasn’t going to make a scene, but he was going to say no.

That night an angel appeared to him in a dream and confirmed what Mary had told him. Joseph didn’t know what he was getting into. He didn’t understand what was happening to him, but he chose to trust the angel.

He chose not to break the engagement but to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. He committed to raising the child as his own.

This is the third Angel to appear during this Advent Christmas narrative. The first appeared to Zechariah to tell this older man that his older wife would bear a child who we would know as John the Baptist. The second angel came to Mary to tell her that she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit. Both Zechariah and Mary had questions for the angel.

Maybe because it was a dream and not really conducive to debate, Joseph did not question the word of the angel. He acted immediately on what the angel was telling him. He didn't argue. He didn't debate. He simply acted on what the angel told him. He trusted that there was something going on that he didn't really understand but that somehow God was acting, and he said yes, to the invitation to be part of this unknown future.

He took Mary as his wife and committed to raising the baby that she would bear – a baby whose very existence would be a proclamation that “God is with us.” He did not know what the future would bring, but he chose to trust that God would guide him on the journey.

This Gospel story reminds us of human problems. It prompts us to think about human responses to human situations.

I remember another young couple. They were best friends and had known each other all their lives. I always thought that they would end up getting married, but it looked like things were going in a different direction. Donna, let's call her, was in a relationship that had many of us quite concerned. As their pastor, I was surprised when Donna and her best friend – Bill – came to see me to tell me they wanted to get married. Donna was pregnant. Bill was not the father of her baby; but he was her very best

friend and had always been in love with her. They both recognized and believed that their relationship was better for the unborn child and for both of them than the destructive one that had separated them for awhile.

They have been married for about 13 years now and are the parents of 4 children with a 5th due any day now. Not long ago, Donna posted on her Facebook page that every time she hears Bill refer to her oldest child as his oldest, or his daughter, she is thankful for the man who has never once reminded her, in any way, that he is not her biological father. Bill and Donna made a commitment to each other and to their family and trusted God to lead them into and through an unknown future.

It's not always easy for us to trust God in the unknown. Many of us have been brought up to trust ourselves.

King Ahaz, in the reading from the prophet Isaiah was like that. Ahaz was "under threat from both friends and enemies. The king of Israel and the king of Aram made a pact to attack Judah."ⁱ Ahaz and his people were afraid. Isaiah, God's prophet, came to urge Ahaz to trust in God's protection. Ahaz wasn't buying any of this, so Isaiah told him to ask God for a sign. It could be anything, but Ahaz refused, saying he would not put the Lord to the test. Ahaz was saying that "he didn't need a sign; he would handle it on his own. He wasn't willing to trust in God; he wanted to trust in himself, in his armies, in his defenses."

But God – the "God who is with us" – Emmanuel has other ideas. "God presents the sign, already in the works. There's a woman already with child, and that child is a sign of God's presence in the world. God tells Ahaz to pay attention, to see that life continues, even in the face of war."

We don't know which child Isaiah was pointing to. Scholars have debated this, and it's impossible for us to know for sure. The real point

here is that “there is hope if you choose to look for it.” Even if we do not specifically ask God for a sign, there are signs of God’s presence with us no matter where we are, if we are only willing to look. Sometimes that sign is the presence of a friend who calls at just the right time. Sometimes it is something that we read when we most need it. It may be something a child says to us, a seemingly random encounter, a feeling inside us. God has many ways of reminding us that God is with us in everything.

We read this passage from Isaiah on the fourth Sunday of Advent because we Christians hear something additional in that promise to Ahaz. In the angel’s words to Joseph, we hear the promise to Ahaz that a child will be born who will be called Emmanuel – meaning God with us. We hear in the Angel’s proclamation to Joseph that the child to be born to Mary – a child to be named Jesus – a name that means “deliverance” or “salvation” – is the embodiment of “God with us”.

Once visited by the Angel, Joseph didn’t hesitate to proceed with the marriage to Mary. Often when God invites us to do something it is something that seems fairly ordinary. God was asking Joseph to continue with the plans he already had, to get married to Mary, but with an important twist. Three more times in the beginning of Matthew’s gospel Joseph would receive an angelic message and would respond immediately.

After Jesus’ birth, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt. Later, he would be told that it was safe to return to Israel, and then again, he was told to go to Galilee rather than Judea. Joseph was a man who clearly paid attention to the messages he received from God through the angels.

He responded to God, not by asking, thinking, or analyzing, but by doing what he was told to do. Rabbi Abraham Heschel once wrote, “A Jew

is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to surpass his deeds, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.”ⁱⁱ

When life throws us unexpected curve balls, we, like Joseph, are called to learn to trust during the journey. The curve ball may, or may not, be something that God has tossed to us, but either way we are called to trust the reality that God is with us.

Even when we think we know where we are going, we are still called to trust that God is with us. As a congregation, we are asking ourselves some very intentional questions about where God is calling us to be, what God is calling us to do in the future. At this point, we don't know the answers to those questions. In fact, we don't even know all the questions. What we can be sure of, however, is that we are not traveling this road alone. God is traveling the road with us; God will guide us, and our job is to trust God along the journey.

Our country is in the middle of a chaotic time. I don't always understand how God works and I'm always aware that this thing called "free will" that God gave us can for a time seem to interfere with what God may intend for us. However, on that journey, we can still trust God who is with us, to help guide us in paths that are very confusing. For me, it's a matter of asking God to help me be faithful to the values that I believe I have learned from God.

It's easy to get drawn into behaviors that do not bring glory to God but rather seem to contradict all the ways that we have been taught to behave and to treat others. When all around us, people are putting others down, saying mean things and name calling, we can ask God to help us not be

influenced by these behaviors. Instead we can trust God to help us continue to be compassionate, caring persons.

In this season where we hear the angels proclaim new hope and promise to our world, we can trust God to be our guide and to use us as agents of peace, hope, joy, love, and trust in our world.

ⁱⁱ www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship Notes for Advent 4, “Are We There Yet? Trust” Quotes in this section, not individually formatted are from this material.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Bruzzese, Michaela. “Just Do It” in Preaching the Word, Sojourner’s subscription service.