

Sunday 29th December 2019
First Sunday of Christmas
Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-end, Matthew 2:13-18

As you sit here in church this morning, I wonder what it has been like in your house over the past few days. Excitement, anticipation, fun and laughter. **AND** no doubt, especially if there have been children around a sense of expectation as Christmas Day finally arrives. Did you get Christmas right this year?

As we await the arrival of a New Year there too may be a sense of anticipation and thanksgiving. Anticipation of what the New Year will bring. Some things we know about, may even have been planning. Others will be unexpected and even surprises. There is also a sense too that as we look forward, we too need to look back. Look back and recollect the year that has passed. There will be some things for which we are of course grateful.

And others that we would quickly like to erase from our memory. Those things we would rather have not they had happened. And perhaps they led us to end up somewhere where we never thought we would go?

I wonder if you have you ever been round the houses to get to where you wanted to go? Or stuck in a place you never intended on being in?

Maybe all of us at one time or another have been in the sort of predicament that Joseph the partner of Mary found himself in. Our gospel for today picks up where we left off on Christmas Eve. The magi have come to pay homage to a king. On their way, they have stopped to ask Herod where to find him. Herod tries to smooth talk the magi into letting him know how their quest turns out. But an angel of the Lord warns them to go home by a different way than they came. They follow this advice.

The main character in this story is not the magi who have just left, and it is not Mary who gave birth to Jesus. Neither is it Herod, the evil and paranoid king. Rather it is Joseph.

Here was a man who'd ended up with a readymade family that he'd had to take on a journey, probably hoping he'd be back at work before too long only to discover he was going to have to live somewhere else first. It's very possible that he spent several months in Bethlehem.

Was he worried that he wouldn't have a job to go back to?

What if he couldn't provide for his family?

But then the Wisemans' gift of gold came just at the right time. Maybe they'd be alright after all, until he got back to his carpentry.

Joseph must have dreaded an angel turning up. Because when an angel turns up it usually means something is going to change.

Think about it:

Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac when an angel stops him and points out a ram caught in the bushes.

Moses, content with his shepherding duties until an angel turns up in a burning bush and tells him he will liberate the Israelites from Pharaoh.

Daniel, thrown in to the lion's den, must have thought 'This is the end of me' but an angel turns up and shuts the mouths of the lions.

Philip, hanging out in Jerusalem, doing his thing and an angel rocks up and says 'Walk down this road until you come across a eunuch who is reading scripture. Go and speak to him about it'

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Mary going about her business and Gabriel comes and mentions having God's baby.

Joseph as the gospel writers record gets several visits from angels:

First of all the angel tells him to marry Mary when he had already decided not to. Then tells him not to go home after being in Bethlehem, he has to take his family to Egypt. And then the angel tells him he can go back but it's not where you came from, and settling eventually in Nazareth.

You may have heard the saying: If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans!

God often has other plans to the ones we make because God sees the bigger picture of our lives and where we sit in the universal story.

I believe that we have to be open to God's leading which means loosening our grip on controlling our lives. We need to let go and let God.

But to do this takes faith. It takes trust also. And we have to learn letting go bit by bit.

Those accounts of an angel directing Joseph's life don't give us the full picture. When we read it straight off it's like Joseph just does whatever he's told to do. It doesn't tell us what he went through mentally and emotionally to follow God plan. Was he anxious? Afraid? Apprehensive? Probably. Did he question what he'd heard? Did he argue about the consequences? No doubt.

Because it's not easy following someone else's plan for our life's journey.

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But just look at Joseph's story. We can read it for our encouragement. God is sovereign. God has our best interests at heart and whether we go all round the houses to get there, God is in it all.

So as we approach 2020 I would encourage each one of you to lay your plans before God. Those things that are on your hearts and in your minds. We can look forward to the working out of the West Sevenoaks Team ministry and all that entails. God has a plan we may not know it, but in his time, he will reveal it to us.

There is a little detail also in this story, Joseph's story which we need to notice. Every time an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, Joseph immediately did what he was told to do. He did not question 'why God?' He just went; he answered God's call with action.

God calls us today. He is calling us to be a voice for peace, justice and grace. He is calling us to challenge the way things are with the world, to stand against evil when we see it. To be the presence of God for those who suffer violence and abuse and to let them know that God is with us, Emmanuel.

When we challenge things, it is never easy, and the Herod's of this world will try to crush us. We need however to connect the human story with Christ's story and to be aware of God's calling in our lives to work for him. To feed the hungry, heal sick and free the oppressed.

As we prepare to enter another year may we resolve to be those hands and feet for God in 2020.

Methodist Covenant prayer

I am no longer my own but yours.

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Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'