

June 7, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: "Mary and Joseph Accepting the Task"

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38; 46-55

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In our sermons through the late spring and through the summer we're looking together at the lives of people in the pages of Holy Scripture, people in the Bible, our ancestors in faith whose lives have been preserved in scripture for us, the story of their lives, in order to shape our identity, helping us become the people that God wants us to be.

In the physical world God gives to us parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, colleagues and mentors – all of whom influence us and help shape who we are and who we are to become: sometimes through their influence which is positive, sometimes through influence that is negative (I don't ever want to be like that!!). Whether positively or negatively, through these relationships we are shaped, molded, and become the people we are.

And it's the same way in the spiritual world. The scripture that God has given us is not merely a book of theology, and it's not merely a book of prayers or of hymns. It's a book of stories filled with people. At the center there is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ; but all kinds of other people are also in the story that God has given to us, and through their lives our own lives are to take shape and be formed, being created and recreated in the image of God.

So we're looking at these lives in the pages of scripture. Since April we've been focusing on some people who lived a long, long time ago, somewhere around 1300 years or more ago, whose stories are told in the books of Genesis and Exodus: Jacob, Joseph and then Moses. And we come today to look at the lives of people whom we usually only think of once a year, at Christmas time – the lives of Mary and Joseph, called by God to fill the role of parents for Jesus. Called to be parents to the one we know of as "the only begotten son of God"; parents to our Lord and Savior; parents to the Messiah, the Christ, the great king, the prophet, the priest above all other, the one beyond compare! Joseph and Mary, in other words, called by God to no small role, no small task.

This in some ways is a unique call within holy history, and a unique moment within history as a whole: there is only one moment of incarnation! Though in some other ways the kind of request made of Mary and Joseph by God is not entirely unique or unexpected at all. That is, throughout the pages of scripture, and especially in the stories told about people, the character of God is revealed as a character in which God comes calling or recruiting. The God of the Bible, though quite self-sufficient and in no need of any of us, quite omniscient, knowing everything, quite powerful over everything – is a God who descends to our level and says "I want you; I'm calling you, inviting you, to share in my work."

God is rather like that famous poster of Uncle Sam from WWI, pointing the finger recruiting. As if to say, “You’re the one I want. No one else.”



So God says the same: “For the work of the Kingdom of God I want you!”

Last Sunday, for example, when we looked at the story of Moses we focused our thoughts on the sense of Moses’ call more than on anything. Moses in the third Chapter of Exodus is minding his own business and God comes calling. And Moses doesn’t at first want to do what God wants him to do. He just doesn’t want to do it! But God persuades him and recruits him to be a person who almost single-handedly resists the power of the greatest king in the world at that time, the king of Egypt; then leads his own people the Hebrews out of slavery; gives to them God’s law; builds them into a nation and brings them through the desert, through the middle of nowhere, to the edge of a land that they can begin to call home.

And if you skim through the rest of the scriptural story, the story of the Bible, you see this recruiting activity of God repeated in many lives.

- Some people called by God are recruited to a lifelong vocation: God says, “This is what you must do with the rest of your life.”
- Some of the people called by God are recruited to do something at some specific moment in time; a “one and done” task. A particular event.
- Some people are called to an overly religious activity like preaching or the establishing of churches.
- But most often if you read the scripture – and this is critical for us in the church to understand – most often when God comes calling, the activity to which God calls people *is not overtly religious*. Faith may enter into it, but the calling is often a mix of the religious and the secular.

To put it another way, nothing is truly secular. Every gift or talent we have, or project we are involved in, has been given to us by God; and when we use our God-given gifts and talents, in the everyday work world around us, whenever we are benefiting people, benefiting society, bringing justice to people and to society, making beautiful those things in the world that is often ugly or warped or twisted in different ways, we are glorifying God and often fulfilling his call.

So we find this: when God comes calling on Moses in the Bible, for example, his calling is definitely religious (he is the quintessential religious law-giver: the law of God is the Law of Moses!). But his calling is also secular: he’s also just a great leader and a superb negotiator when confronted with power. And he uses those gifts I fulfillment of God’s call.

Or we think of **King David**, Israel's greatest king, who lived about a thousand years before the birth of Christ. He's not only a religious hymn writer, a poet whose hymns, whose songs whose psalms we sing to this very day. But he's also a secular politician and he has this remarkable gift of being able to bring people into a community, a disparate rabble of people, bringing them together and forming a community.

Or we might think of **Esther**, a person who not only calls people together religiously, to fast and pray, but who rises up at one particular moment in life, when her life is at risk, to do the right thing. Her people, the Jewish people, are in jeopardy. Their lives are at stake. There is going to be genocide unless she steps into a place of danger and tells the King what's happening and seeks his help and she rises up for that moment and heeds that call. Not a religious activity as such, just an act of great courage.

So the God of the scripture is a God who calls people again and again, seeks assistance from ordinary people like you and me in every sphere of life. This in and of itself is a quite remarkable honor: I mean, *it's God*, the one at the top, who says to us, "I want you"! What an honor that is! Quite remarkable! But what is just as remarkable is that the call of God is often also bothersome and inconvenient. The call of God so often stretches people in ways which at first they don't want to handle; they don't want to deal with; they don't want to be stretched.

True of Moses and Joseph, for example, and certainly the case with Mary and Joseph in our story: Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus.

On the one hand as we already have mentioned being called to be the parents of Jesus the Son of God is an indescribable honor. I mean it's just remarkable that God should call two ordinary human beings to this particular task. On the other hand, though, there are also aspects of this call which are rather humbling, and at times humiliating, as well. That is, wrapped up in the honor there is a humbling and even a humiliation.

In Mary and Joseph's case, their call was humbling because, as in the case with every parent, their call was not first of all about them, but about their child, the one coming into the world. There was no financial gain in it for them. There was no special allowance to raise "the only Son of God"; there was no immediate fame and honor. Maybe we remember them now, famous a long time later; but immediately, at the time? No! None of that was on the horizon. Just an increased sense of responsibility which begins with joy, but which so often can morph into the thought that we've been given a burden that is more than we want to or are able to carry. Let me put it like this: it's bad enough handling normal parental thoughts – wondering if we are really capable of being a parent to the child God has entrusted to us – but if you'd been entrusted not merely with a child, but with "the only Son of God" what about the fear of messing up with that?! I mean, this becomes an enormous responsibility that you have to carry and you go "*Well, great honor, to be sure. But wait a minute. I'm not sure I really want to sign up for that for the long haul. An honor yes but . . . this is more than I bargained for.*" That's a possible response unless we understand the remarkable honor of the one calling – God himself – and that God's call more often than not has about it a quality that humbles and at times humiliates.

A week ago yesterday, May 31, a service took place here in the sanctuary celebrating the 50th anniversary of a group known as L'Arche. L'Arche is an organization which takes care of the intellectually impaired. It builds communities. It provides support for friends and family of those who are intellectually impaired. The impairment may be because of some genetic reason: Downs Syndrome, or something else. But L'Arche provides incredible support for those in need. The service was absolutely beautiful and moving. I came for the opening, to say a word of greeting on behalf of the church, but decided to stay for the whole service, and my heart was moved as participants at every level of intellectual ability participated.

During the service, my own memory went back to my childhood, where my mother had to care for an aunt who was brain damaged at birth. I remembered her need for help, which often wasn't there. And looking out, on those gathered, I realized that of the approximately 400 people present, about half of them were caregivers, many of them family members. So that here in this room, this sanctuary, there were at least 200 people who had given their lives to care for a person in need, for someone who could not help themselves, who could not live alone without some kind of assistance, without some kind of help.

And it was moving, stirring, *and clear that they weren't there resenting the call!* They weren't there saying "My life has been taken away from me by this other!" They were praising God for this call and this sense of responsibility which gave meaning and significance to the life of the one they cared for, and to their lives as well.

To begin with, though, it can be pretty humbling to think of one's life being lived not for one's self but for another. No fame, no fortune, just work, day after day after day, after week after week after week, after year after year after year, with no relief in sight. And perhaps Mary and Joseph felt that way once the initial aura of the call faded away; perhaps they were wrestling with this thought: that a hard and a difficult journey lay ahead of them. An honor to be sure but at the same time demanding and humbling.

And in some measure as well, awkward, embarrassing and humiliating. To put it bluntly when you read Mary and Joseph's story you come face to face with the fact that, for starters, they weren't married. They were engaged, betrothed, but they were not married. For Mary to find out that she was pregnant and for Joseph to find out that Mary was pregnant, out of wedlock, was at the least mortifying. For faithful believers, well, you simply did not have sex until you were married; and with a pregnancy beginning to show itself more and more, what kind of explanation could you give to your family and your friends and to the local gossips in the small town of Nazareth as to how this happened? "Oh, it's all God's will!"? "It's not my fault!"? "God's involved here!"? Right! Hard to persuade anybody on that one.

In fact even husband-to-be Joseph needed some persuading to believe that this was God's will, that God was in this, and that Mary had done nothing that was immoral. He needed a powerful dream and the force of a full-sized angel to get him to shape up and to understand what was going on. In the dream the angel says,

“Joseph, son of David! (God knows us by name when he comes calling), Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife (God knows our fears and our anxieties). For the child conceived in you is from the Holy Spirit. (Nothing untoward. God is at work here. You need to believe this.)

Short and sweet, but powerful enough as a call from God himself, powerful enough to keep Joseph “in the game” when he wants to pull out, *and to help him rise above*

- *the fear of shame and embarrassment and humiliation which so easily can be a fear for you and me too;*
- *the fear of what others may think of us if we give ourselves too deliberately to what we perceive of to be the call or the will of God;*
- *the fear within ourselves of what God may ask us to do that we may think is somehow beneath us or not appropriate for us in some way.*

Long ago Meade McGuire wrote this little poem: not great poetry but it certainly comes back to haunt me from time to time.

Father where shall I work today and my love flowed warm and free.

Then he pointed out a tiny spot and said tend that for me.

I answered quickly, “Oh no, not that! Why no one would ever see, no matter how well my work was done. Not that little place for me.”

And the word he spoke, it was not stern, he answered me tenderly.

“Ah, little one, search that heart of thine. Are you working for them or for me?”

Nazareth (going back to the story of Mary and Joseph and of Jesus) was a little place, and so was Galilee.

Talk about humbling! Talk about humiliating! It’s true of the call not only of Mary and Joseph but also of the baby they bore, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Think of it:

eternally divine yet called to live within another for a while and then to be born; called to live in obscurity for decades (what a temptation while growing up to say “don’t you know who I really am?!”); called to put up with people who did not understand him; called to be rejected and despised and to be hung upon a cross with his body broken and his blood shed; called to be exposed in nakedness and in pain to the world he made.

Talk about humbling and humiliating. Yet he did this. He did this for you and me. He did this because he loves us. He did this because there was no other way to pay for our sins. He did this to reconcile us to God. He did this for us whose relationship with God has become warped and twisted. Thank God that he accepted God’s call in his life despite the shame, the humiliation, the humbling.

And so too did Mary and Joseph.

1. Honored by God to be sure. I mean, what a remarkable calling to be the parents of the Son of God, a task unique in all of history.

2. But Humbled by God as well; the honor mixed up, as it often is, with humbling and humiliation, with difficulties and fears common to us all. Thank God, though, that they rose above the shame and said “Yes.”

So my friends listen, listen for the call of God. We come together for worship Sunday by Sunday to listen for God, to hear a word from God. The God of the scripture, the God of the people in the scripture is a God who speaks. So when we gather, come expecting that God will speak.

- Come listening through your Bible. Read the scripture God has given you whether it's alone or with others, expecting that the God who spoke to Mary and Joseph will speak to us as well. Our call may not be to a unique task, but even in the mundane God is at work, sanctifying the ordinary by his call.
- Come listening for God in Bible study groups with others. We may not see an angel with wings powerful and awesome, but so often the angels God sends are our brothers and sisters in Christ, with whom we speak about holy things and through whom God speaks to us just as surely as he did to Mary and Joseph.
- Come listening this summer, as you go out into God's creation. Psalm 19 says, “*The heavens declare the glory of God. There are no words but their voice goes out throughout the earth.*” God speaks through his creation.
- So come with an attentive ear asking that God would give to you a sense of his call, whether it's through a special task, or through the ordinary everyday tasks of life; that we would see and perceive these tasks as coming to us from God, God himself singling us out to accomplish for him, whatever he calls for us to do.

And this view of life will change things. There's no room for pride: the honoring is mixed up too frequently with the humbling! And there's no room for despair. The humbling and humiliation is a call from none other than our creator and redeemer. God honors us in his call no matter what it is or where it lies. May we have ears to hear what the God of Mary and Joseph is calling us to do and to be today

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