

Matthew 1:18-25

As we lit our Advent candles over the past three weeks, we considered three ways in which we prepare for the coming of Christ this Advent season. As the candle of Hope was lit, we stressed the need to keep the vision of God's kingdom alive in our hearts - that vision that gives hope as it tells us about the purpose and meaning of life.

As we lit the candle of Peace - we looked at the wonder of how God's peace comes as a gift to us when we seek it, when we turn from those things that build walls between us and our neighbours and our God and follow in the path shown to us by Jesus.

Last week, as we lit the candle of Joy, we thought about how God grants his gift of joy to those whose hands are open to give and receive the blessings that God pours out on God's faithful people.

Today, as we see Christmas approaching, let us consider the importance of our saying "Yes" to God's love, and how our saying yes to love is able to bring to birth in our world, a new and marvellous thing; how it prepares us and others for the coming of the Messiah.

The Christmas story is strongly dependent upon something that most of us might consider somewhat strange. It is dependent upon two rather ordinary people saying "yes" to God; and saying "yes" in the most unusual, the most unexpected circumstances, to a proposal that is without question, quite strange, no matter how we might look at it.

We are well aware of Mary and how she said "yes" to God, and so came to be the mother of the Messiah, mother of the one we call the Son of God, mother of the one who would die so that we might live. But, have you considered how this "Yes" profoundly changed the course of Mary's life? How her willingness to trust the angel of God and to accept his word altered her entire world?

With its focus on Joseph as the main character, Matthew's unique story of Jesus' birth will probably not be the model for any children's Christmas pageant where Joseph seems to walk in the shadows as a necessary, if somewhat embarrassing appendage.

In contrast, Matthew's narrative takes great pains to identify Joseph as the father of Jesus, tracing his link to King David in the elaborate genealogy that opens Matthew's gospel. And even if Jesus' birth is clearly a miracle of God's power through the Spirit, still Joseph is the real father, who by naming the child according to God's command and Jewish law, in effect adopts the child as his own. The adoption is no mere fiction, but becomes Matthew's way of ushering us into the mystery of the incarnation apart from which this Jesus could not stand in the line of Davidic ancestry.

As Matthew begins his narrative, we're told that Mary and Joseph were married (not engaged or betrothed as most English translations have) but not yet living together. To fully appreciate this story, we need to understand arranged marriages in the first century world. First century marriages were economic arrangements between honourable fathers for the primary purpose

of producing legitimate male heirs for the husband's household. Spouses may have come to love each other, but love wasn't the reason for the marriage.

So the "marriage" between Mary and Joseph had been arranged and was already "legal," which is why Joseph is referred to as Mary's husband and divorce (the word used in English translations) is mentioned in the story. But Mary hadn't yet gone to live with Joseph. Traditionally this waiting period could be up to a year. Without DNA testing, the only way to know if a male child was the legitimate son of a woman's husband was for the wife to be a virgin when she moved into her husband's home, and for other men not to have access to her after she did.

Waiting to move into her husband's home, Mary is suddenly to be with child by one who is not the man she married. The risks are tremendous. And what exactly is this child of God's love to be? This child that she says "yes" to when she opens her life so completely to God?

At the time that Mary conceived there were numerous Messiahs, many of them: con artists, cult leaders, and power seekers, who proclaimed that they had been chosen by God to take the throne of David; to take David's throne back from the corruption of the rulers who sat upon it; to take it back from the control of the many who had manipulated it since the fall of Jerusalem: from the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians and now the Romans; to take it back and to sit upon it and bring to Israel that time that God had promised would come.

But, most of these so-called Messiahs were either ridiculed or killed or both. So why would her child, this child that she was told would be of God be any different? How could she really be sure? Truly Mary had a lot to store up in her heart and ponder. The Scriptures tell us over and over again that she had not only to store in her heart the angel greetings and the words of shepherds and wise men and prophets, but she also had to ponder what all these would do to her life and the lives of her child and of her husband.

And Joseph? What did it mean for him to say "yes" to God? How easy could it have been? Joseph is often forgotten. But consider for a minute, his role in bringing Jesus into this world. Without Joseph how would Mary have been supported? Her family would have been bound by the law to reject her if Joseph had rejected her. Her baby would have been seen as illegitimate. Her life, and his, would have been ruined. She may even have been stoned to death as was allowed by the Law of Moses.

But what for so long had been overlooked, is the way in which Matthew shows us Joseph reversing the role of husband and wife, from the dominant pattern of the wife as a servant to her husband's needs, to the new arrangement, in which Joseph is the servant of his wife. Her needs and her child's needs will dictate their lives, and their domicile. Through thick and thin he manages. And like a traditional wife, he fades from view in the doing of what must be done. We have no knowledge of what became of him, only that he disappears before Jesus, as an adult is baptized in the Jordan.

Though Mary is silent in his gospel, Matthew is not silent about women, five

of whom he includes, against all precedent in the genealogy of Jesus. And any one of the foremothers he includes could set tongues wagging in their bold defiance of sexual norms.

Rahab, known as the mother of Israel for saving Joshua in Canaan, ran a brothel there. Tamar, the daughter-in-law of the patriarch Judah, dressed herself as a prostitute and lured him into impregnating her so that she no longer would be a childless widow. Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, saved them both from starvation, by seducing Boaz, Naomi's wealthy older cousin. Ruth became the mother of Obed, and ancestor of David. And Bathsheba, whom King David had soldiers bring to him to satisfy his lust, though she was married to one of his generals at that time, became the mother of Solomon, Israel's greatest king.

Joseph, the central character in this story, is no wishy-washy person, but a person of strength and purpose. He is committed and faithful to his religious traditions, and ready to act on that commitment. Joseph nurtured and protected and watched over and loved both Mary and her child. And so brought into the world, as much as did Mary, that child whom we call the gift of God's love.

But, how easy could it have been at first? How easy could it have been for him to say yes to the Angel who came to him and told him that the story that Mary had told him was true? We aren't given too many details of Joseph's encounter with the Angel. It wouldn't be surprising to discover that it took more than one meeting to convince him. Maybe it took two or three or more

dreams and the angel's message before Joseph believed what was happening. After all, he was a simple carpenter, not a very educated man when it came to theology and matters of angels.

It is hard to believe many of the things that God tells us, hard to accept, especially when our feelings have been hurt and our sense of what is really possible in our world is limited by the pain that we experience and the pain which we see in the world around us. Could it have been any different for Joseph?

Joseph, the scriptures tell us, was a righteous man, a good man, a kind man. He didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace, but he certainly didn't want to be married to her either. In fact, he had resolved to divorce her, just before the angel finally appeared to him. It must have been hard for him to accept what he heard, yet, with the same kind of faith with which Mary said "yes" to God, so did Joseph. He said "yes" to God and he took Mary, his wife, into his home.

And what would the future bring? What would Mary's and Joseph's "yes" to God bring? It would bring to them a wonderfully intimate experience of God's love. It would bring to them and to the world not just the marvel of a new and tender life. It would bring to them and the world the King of Love, the Shepherd of the Sheep, the one whom we await this day and the one whom we know already in our hearts if we too have said "Yes" to God.

God's promise is not only to Mary and to Joseph, but to us as well, the

promise that if we say "yes" to God and his gift of Love that we and our world will be blessed. But, it is not an easy thing to say "yes." To say "yes" involves risks. To say "yes" involves overcoming our sense of pain and hurt. Think of the number of people whom you know who seem to live by the maxim: "once burned, twice shy;" the number of people who are unwilling to risk accepting love; the number of people who are afraid to show the love that God puts into every heart; the number of people who have erected a wall around their life so that they will not ever again feel the hurt and the pain because of how an imperfect love has let them down.

Yet, ultimately, love is what it is all about; what living is all about; whether that love be the perfect love of God or the imperfect love of human kind. Pain and hurt will come to us all, whether we love or not. Pain and hurt will afflict us all, whether others love us or not. Pain and hurt came to Mary. Pain and hurt came to Joseph. Pain and hurt came to Jesus.

The big question for us is: will that pain and hurt have any meaning? Will it have any sense??? People unfamiliar with our God, marvel and wonder at the sign of his love that we display. They marvel and wonder at the cross, a symbol of suffering, yet also a symbol of so much more. That cross signifies that God loved us so much that he gave his only son so that we might not perish. That cross signifies that God loves us so much, that he walks with us into the worst that life can deal out, and helps us to overcome it.

When we say "yes" to God's love we say "yes" to that which will change our lives and give our lives meaning and purpose. When we say "yes" to God's

love, we say "yes" to that which will transform our lives and give to them a radiance that transforms others.

Christmas, as most people over the age of five know, can be a very difficult time of year. It is a time when we feel that we are supposed to be happy and joyous, a time in which we and the world around us, so it seems, put upon us this expectation that we should be full of good cheer and at one with all of our family and with all of our friends.

We can really lay a guilt trip on ourselves and allow others to lay a guilt trip on us during this season. And it is so hard when we do see others full of joy and expectation; and we have in ourselves little but a sense of pain and loss. It is so hard to really embrace what this season is truly about: which is nothing more or less than making room in our lives for God's love; nothing more or less than saying yes to the wonderful gift that God offers us through Christ our Lord.

There are no "should haves" at Christmas, other than the "should have" saying "yes" to God's love, and that should always come to us as a gentle knock at the door, rather than an overwhelming pressure to be happy and to be a million and one other things that we simply are not and cannot be.

The Advent season is all about being prepared for the coming of Christ into our lives and into our hearts. It is about hope, about peace, about joy, and about love. As you prepare for Christmas day, remember that these things; hope, peace, joy, and love are gifts to us, not demands upon us. They are

gifts by which God comes to us and changes us and our world.

Say "yes" to God's love as did Mary and Joseph, even though the saying "yes" involves risk and sacrifice. Say "yes." Keep the vision alive. And walk in the path of Jesus with open hands and hearts, and God will come to you and to our world, and make all those rough places smooth.

God will come and as God did at the creation of the world and at the tomb of Jesus, God will bring order out of chaos and life out of death. This is the mission of our God in and through Christ Jesus our Lord, who by the power of the Holy Spirit can accomplish all things. Praise be to God, day by day.

Amen!

Prayers of Intercession for Advent 4 - December 18, 2022

Gracious God, as we meet together to worship you, we pray that you will grant us a glimpse of your glory so that we may rejoice in your presence and abide in your peace.

Lord Jesus, we remember at this time that you came to disrupt the world, and to invite us to turn our lives, and all of humankind, to You, O God.

You brought love to those who were unloved; hope to those who had nothing to look forward to; peace to those who were full of anxious daily cares.

But you also brought judgment to those who thought they were good; to those who were content with their own lives; to those who looked down on other people and who were sure that they knew everything about You, O God.

We pray that your Holy Spirit will come into our lives to turn us all again to you: to help us to see ourselves as we truly are, your beloved children. Transform us more and more into your likeness, healing, refining, and purifying each of us to become all that you envision for us. Fill us with the fruits of your Holy Spirit: the gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. With the power of your endless grace, mercy, and compassion we ask that you deepen our faith and help us to hold on to the promise that we may truly share in your kingdom and know the joy of your loving presence.

God of love **Remember your people.**

Lord Jesus, we pray that you will prepare us for your coming into the world: strengthen our resolve to be actively engaged, through our words and actions, in your ongoing work of bringing your kingdom near. In spite of all the suffering, harm, and ills in the world, we pray that you will revive our dreams of justice for all and restore our passion to act for what is right, good, and true.

God of love **Remember your people.**

Lord Jesus, as we complete our preparations in these last days before the celebration of your birth, we pray for all in need. Open our eyes to search the face of the stranger and there to see your face. Give us the sensitivity to be a loving presence and be willing to listen to those around us who may be experiencing loss and grief, doubt and hesitation, confusion, and concerns. May your Spirit's healing presence minister to the aches, longings, and dreams of all whom we meet. We bring our own needs before you too, knowing you often surprise us by coming to us through the words and action of others as your messenger. Open our hearts and minds to receive your loving kindness in unexpected ways.

God of love **Remember your people.**

Merciful God, there are those whom we know who are ill, or are recovering from surgery at this time; We pray for them now as we name them and love them in our hearts. Bring your healing power to strengthen them. As well we pray for those living in despair and loneliness, or are struggling with their physical or emotional pain, substance abuse or mental illness. We pray for those grieving the loss of a loved one this Christmas. Surround them with your healing presence. What we have promised in love and prayer let us never forget to do.

God of love **Remember your people.**

Gracious God, too often we have remained silent and missed opportunities to share with others the message of love which you brought into the world. May your love motivate our care for this neighbourhood and for the wider community and help us all to play a part in addressing the social ills that debilitate and imprison so many. We ask that you give us all an unquestioning faith, the deep faith of Joseph and show us a new way to live, so that, with your forgiveness, and with an awareness of your presence, we can truly claim to follow you in thought and word and deed.

God of love **Remember your people.**

Merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. **Amen.**