Home...
SERMON SERIES OVERVIEW

Home is the place where we belong . . . the place we are most truly ourselves. Perhaps this year, we are being invited to go “home” by a different way. This is literally what the Magi had to do in the Christmas story, after they worshipped Jesus and then learned of Herod’s evil intentions for the newborn child. They returned home by another way (Matt. 2:12). The destination is the same . . . we are trying to get home, to the place where we most belong. We simply must take a different road or path to arrive there this year. This Advent, we are invited to hold this season with open hands, to be flexible, to go another way, if necessary, rather than plow ahead with “the way we’ve always done it,” to experience Christ in a new way.

BIBLE S.W.A.P.


Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
   for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
   in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
   that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
   and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
   to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
   before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
   for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
   by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
   the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
   to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

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W—What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

Zechariah’s Benedictus prayer at the end of Luke 1 is his response to an intense nine-month period in his life when his ability to speak was taken away. During this time of force silence, the old Hebrew priest, Zechariah, and his barren
wife Elizabeth prepared for the miraculous birth of their son. Their son would be John the Baptist, a great prophet of God, who famously heralded the birth of Jesus. Luke’s gospel account begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth of John to his older parents who were a model couple for Mary and Joseph.

There is much for us to learn from this couple. They faithfully served God all their lives, roles they were seemingly destined to fulfill. Zechariah was born into the priestly line of Abijah and Elizabeth was a descendent of Moses’ brother Aaron. Despite their inability to conceive a child – the ultimate blessing in a young marriage and security in old age for a Hebrew couple -- they never wavered from obedience and reverence for God. While it is typical to interpret the silence imparted to Zechariah as discipline from God after he requested a sign to verify the astounding promise announced to him by the angel Gabriel, some suggest that the period of silence was a gift to Zechariah, to Elizabeth, and to the community who were watching the miracle unfolding before their eyes with great curiosity. Before moving to the application section of the notes and drawing your own conclusions, read all of Luke 1. Notice when you read about fear, doubt, the appearance of angels, family interactions, and the response of the community. Soak in the story.

A-Apply
Enuma Okoro wrote “Silence and other Surprising Invitations of Advent” which draws from the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1. He points out in Day 10’s reflection that Zechariah’s doubt did not prevent the miracle of John’s birth from happening, it “just forced Zechariah into silent retreat.” Okoro adds, “What if the silence God bestowed on Zechariah was not fully punishment but also an odd blessing? What if God was offering Zechariah nine months to sit with the news, to ponder God’s words, and to process the stupefied awe in which he surely found himself? What if the time of formal silence was God granting Zechariah the gift of some necessary internal solitude in preparation to receive the miracle and to dwell in God’s faithfulness?

After sitting with this too-good-to-be-true news, when the time comes for silence to end, Zechariah can respond in his own words for the whole community to hear:

By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

P- Prayer
Lord, your compassion extends beyond what we can imagine. Where we may only see punishment and holy reprimand, help us look for a holy invitation to a deeper understanding of you. Amen.*

*From “Silence and Other Surprising Invitations of Advent,” p. 48
BIBLE S.W.A.P.

S—Scripture: Psalm 42:1-11

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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W—What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

This passage is the only literal reference to shepherds in the New Testament; elsewhere they appear in parables and figures of speech, most often in the Gospels according to Harper Collins Bible Dictionary 2011, p. 952. Jesus uses shepherds in his parables and quotes the Hebrew Scripture references to shepherds throughout Luke. Jesus calls himself The Good Shepherd and claims that his mission was “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” in Matthew 10:6; 15:24. Could it be that he heard as a little boy about the shepherds who came with haste to see him at his birth? Could the Good Shepherd have learned about watchfulness from these veterans of the fields who waited every night, watching for what might happen to them, to their sheep, and to the world around them? In their watchful state, the angel of the Lord appears to announce a sign—the baby Jesus—that God has sent a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The goodness of the kingdom of God is bursting through and beginning to reign on earth—right there in the shepherds’ field.

Jesus said this about his followers who keep watch with spiritual eyes: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” (Luke 10:23). J. Barrie Shepherd, in his book “Seeing with the Soul,” explains that Jesus “came to tell
us, and show us, that life has another meaning; that just beneath the surface of what we usually call ‘reality’ there is a dimension of depth and wonder awaiting our discovery, a dimension which the ultimate reality – God – is revealed to all who are willing to see.” (p. 10)

A- Apply

“...might it not be that here, right at the outset God was giving us a sign, a preview, as it were, of all that was to follow; and that in his triumphant escape from beneath the shadow of death, in this initial glad outwitting of the dread powers of evil we gain a glimpse, a fleeting foretaste of that final, splendid, ultimate and almost incredible outcome? ‘And this will be a sign . . .’ the angel said. Not just the humble birth, cowshed and manger, but this whole ‘Christ the Lord . . . born to you this day,’ what the scholars call The Christ Event from start to finish – the stable to the stone that rolled away – this entire lifetime, this history, this breaking into history of dizzying eternity. All this will be a sign to you and me,” writes Shepherd (pp. 14-15) He challenges us in verse form to heed the sign that tells us there is more to life than may appear to be evident at first glance. The sign points beyond itself to:

Something, someone vaster

More simple, yet complex

More loving, more forgiving

More life-creating and life-giving

than we could ever hope for, wish for, dream of in our maddest fantasies.

Make a note of something from your life experience that affirms each of the concepts above. Take time to meditate on what God has revealed to you as you have “kept watch” like the Nativity shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem.

P-Prayer

As I begin this new day, Lord, open my eyes and ears, all my senses, however many, to the signs that will surround me, to the glory that lies just below the surface, to your sacred, hidden presence within everything that is. Amen*

*This prayer is found on page 15 of “Seeing with the Soul” by J. Barrie Shepherd, Upper Room Books, 1991
BIBLE S.W.A.P.
S—Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25
Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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W-What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?
When Joseph faced a tough decision – what to do about Mary? – he wrestled out his decision in the middle of the night by way of a dream. Trevor Hudson in “Pauses for Advent” says that “Joseph represents the guided life.” Joseph takes steps toward clarity and serves as an example for all of us. First, he faces facts: His fiancée is pregnant. He weighs his options: remain with her or leave her. He takes time to decide. “Joseph shows courage by considering a difficult situation from different perspectives. When we find ourselves faced with difficult decisions, we too need to reflect on them from all possible angles,” writes Hudson (p. 35).

“Second, Joseph listens for the word of the Lord, which comes to him in a dream. Listening for the Lord lies at the heart of the guided life. Third, Joseph follows the guidance he receives. Even though his decision could mean losing his reputation as a righteous man, he acts on the guidance he receives from God. Even though the Gospel of Matthew records no spoken words from Joseph concerning his decision, his life speaks loudly about the importance of finding and seeking the Lord’s will. In this regard, Joseph is a wonderful mentor and friend,” summarizes Hudson.

When Matthew inserts the citation from Isaiah 7:14 into the narrative to confirm that Jesus’ life conforms to prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, he chooses to emphasize that God desires to be with humans. Emmanuel, God is with us, is an important attribute of the Messiah. Certainly appearing to humans through angelic proclamations and dreams before the birth of Christ demonstrates God’s commitment to proclaim the Good News.

A- Apply
The example of Joseph inspires us to seek to live the guided life. At the beginning of the pandemic, I struggled to make decisions. How was I supposed to lead Chapelwood’s Grow Ministry of Adult Discipleship when we could not gather for worship, classes, prayer, or other kinds of groups and events that we relied on as a church community for fellowship and encouragement? One night before bed, I asked God to come to me in a dream. That night, I saw my friend and
spiritual mentor Virginia Graef in a dream. Virginia passed away several years ago. One of my favorite things about her were her facial expressions. In this dream, I was standing in a restaurant setting, speaking to a group. Virginia was in a booth nearby. Like Joseph, she did not speak, but she looked at me with a reassuring smile as if to say, “You’ve got this.” God used this dream to encourage me and strengthen me for the days ahead. I woke up free of anxiety and excited about the ministry opportunities that lay in front of us as a church.

Think about a decision you are facing today. Like Joseph, face the facts of the situation, write down your options, and ask God for guidance. Be ready to follow instructions!

The gift of Jesus, Emmanuel, is a fulfillment of God’s promise -- “I am with you” -- and an invitation -- “Will you be with me?” We have a choice to respond. Choosing to live the “with-God” life is an acceptance of God’s grace. Hudson suggests this exercise: Every time you begin a new activity at work or home, say to God, “I want to do this with you.” Expect God to work with you and through you in everything you do.

P-Prayer
The angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Try turning the angel’s message to Joseph into a personal prayer. Insert your name and imagine an angel encouraging you with these words:

“Your name, child of Joseph, do not be afraid to let God take care of you.” Amen.*

*From an Advent service at Chapelwood’s Center for Christian Spirituality as taught by Michael and Rachel Sciretti, December 29, 2019.
And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
    Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
    and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
    from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
    and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
    and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
    in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
    to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

W—What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?
The account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth is found in Luke 1:39-56. It occurs right after Gabriel appears to Mary to announce the news that she will bear a son who will be called Jesus. She went “with haste” to the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are expecting their own miracle child – John the Baptist. In this setting, Mary and Elizabeth offer mutual support, encouragement, and spiritual vision of the great things God has in store for them and for Israel with the birth of their babies. The song which follows their rejoicing is known as the Magnificat – the title is from the opening word in Latin. Its background is probably the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. With these words, Mary is portrayed as the “model of faith who has believed ‘what was spoken to her from the Lord’; she is the one who fulfills Jewish expectation,” according to the Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 675.

The song has two parts. The first part (v. 46-49) is a personal expression of Mary’s thankfulness at being chosen as the handmaiden that God will use. The second part (v. 50-56) expresses the thanksgiving of the nation. God’s character and God’s mission and promises to Israel are the focus of Mary’s devotion. In looking for what we can obey in this passage, three principles emerge. First, find a spiritual friend who is “on the same page” that you are for support and nurture in the faith. Second, when big things happen that God is using to get your attention, respond with praise and gratitude to
your Creator who is working through you. And third, look beyond your personal blessing to locate your life circumstances and calling in the context of the greater world around you.

A-Apply
Dr. John Stephens writes that Mary is the most embodying, best example of radical acceptance. With her words, “Let it be unto me” (Luke 1:38) she demonstrates power in vulnerability and availability, in contrast to those who grasp for and are seduced by power. He calls what she displays “radical receptivity.” The definition of radical is “of or relating to the root or the origin.” Jesus is the root of all life and Mary’s response to Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection is total devotion.

“Mary believed blindly. Again and again she had to confirm that belief, and each time with more difficulty. Her faith was greater, more heroic than that of any other human being . . For years she had to combat an only too natural confusion. Who was this ‘Holy One’ whom she, a mere girl, had borne? This ‘great’ one she had suckled and known in all his helplessness? Later she had to struggle against the pain of seeing him steadily outgrow her love, even purposely flee it to that realm of ineffable remoteness which she could not enter. Not only did she have to accept this, but to rejoice in it as the fulfilment of God’s will. . . Perseverance in faith, even on Calvary – this was Mary’s inimitable greatness.” (From Romano Guardini’s essay “The Holy Mother” in “Watch for the Light”, Plough Publishing House, 2001, p. 214-215)

P-Prayer
Trustworthy God, there is no one on whom we can depend more than you. Your promises never fail. Your mercies are new every morning. Forgive us when we waver in faith. Help us to remember your history of loving-kindness that culminates in the Incarnation. Amen.*

*Prayer is from “Silence and Other Surprising Invitations of Advent,” p. 98.

Going Beyond the Sermon is written by Teresa Rossy, Director of Grow Ministries, Chapelwood United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. Source material is quoted throughout. The sermons are streamed online at www.chapelwood.org/archives. To get Going Beyond the Sermon in your inbox, e-mail Laura Frost, lfrost@chapelwood.org.