

Sermon “Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda”
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Olivet Congregational Church
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Isaiah 35:1-10

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.’

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 1:18-25

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

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 fulfil 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.

Sermon – “Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda”

Joseph **should have** had Mary stoned if he had followed the tenants of his faith when his bride told him she was pregnant. “She shall be

brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house." (Deuteronomy 22:21)

But instead, we hear that because Joseph was **righteous**, he decided against having her stoned and planned to divorce her quietly.

Joseph **could have** divorced Mary and let her deal with the pain and humiliation that comes with being an unwed mother in Jewish society. He could have subjected her and her son to a difficult life.

Joseph **would have** divorced Mary quietly if the angel had not appeared in his dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child she was carrying in her womb was conceived through the Holy Spirit. Oh, and Joseph was to name that child, Jesus.

Shoulda. Coulda. Woulda.

But instead, Joseph accepted Mary's pregnancy and adopted her son. Jesus became their son. Jesus became Mary and Joseph's son.

We don't hear much about Joseph's reaction to the angel's visit. The angel didn't even appear to him while he was wide awake. The angel appeared in Joseph's dream. Yet, Joseph trusted the angel in his dream.

I wonder, did Joseph gradually awaken from his sleep, rub his eyes, shake his head, pinch himself to be sure he was awake, and once he knew he was awake, did he question if an angel really spoke to him while he was sleeping? Did he question the angel's story – that the infant in Mary's womb was conceived through the Holy Spirit? Did he debate what he would do about Mary once he was fully awake? Or did he awaken from a sound sleep immediately after his dream, convinced that he **should** make the decision that he **would** still take Mary as his wife and decide that he **could** raise a child that was not his. **Should. Would. Could.**

In his opinion piece, "When obeying God means disobeying the Bible," Chuck Queen writes, "Matthew says that because Joseph was "a righteous man" he wanted to handle this quietly so as not to bring public shame and disgrace to

Mary. In other words, because he was a righteous person he decided not to obey the Scripture that judged and condemned her.”

Queen goes on to quote a well-known Bible scholar and preacher that preachers turn to, Dr. Fred Craddock. Dr. Craddock had preached on this passage, saying:

“Joseph is a good man, and he rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time. He loves his Bible and knows his Bible and bless his heart for it. But he reads his Bible through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of a God who is loving and kind. Therefore he says, ‘I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her.’” Craddock then asks: “Where does it say that, Joseph? In your Bible? I’ll tell you where it says that. It says that in the very nature and character of God.”

We believe in a God of love. We believe that God’s love is steadfast, endures forever, and is beyond measure. We believe in a God of forgiveness, mercy and grace. We believe in a God that so loves the world that God became human – was born an infant to two seemingly unlikely human parents who experienced extraordinary circumstances.

They were two parents who said “yes” to an angel and defied societal norms; trusting in their God, believing that they were called to be part of God’s plan, the plan for God’s son to be born into the world. A plan for love to be born in the world, for love to triumph over society’s expectations, rules, and legalism, for Jesus to live and to demonstrate extravagant love.

Now I cannot imagine that Mary and Joseph could have fully realized what was involved in God’s plan for them to be parents. What new parent actually understands what lies ahead? While Mary only had one question for the angel, I imagine that she had questions about motherhood. Like, what would it be like to be the mother of God’s son? What will life will be like? What should I expect? Will I be good enough?

Joseph never had a chance to ask the angel in his dreams any questions. But I am sure he had some. Will I be able to love this boy as much as I would my own son? I am only a carpenter and an old one at that. Am I too old? Will I be good enough?

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, what questions do we have – for God, for ourselves – as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus as an infant, as we look to bring God to our world? We have all been chosen by God. We may not know exactly what that plan entails or how God’s plan involves us. And our God knows we are imperfect people but intends to use us in our imperfections. In our minds, maybe we are even unlikely participants in God’s plan. But God still invites us to be part of her plan. That plan involves following the way of Jesus, includes trusting Emmanuel, God with us. We know God’s plan involves service, love for a neighbor and even for our enemies, forgiving again and again and again, and letting love take precedence over rules and triumph over hate. God is with us.

We know that when God’s world comes to pass, like we hear of in Isaiah’s words on the restored Jerusalem:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.”

Weak hands will be made strong; feeble knees firm.
The fearful will trust God. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame shall leap and the speechless will sing for joy.

Water will flow in the desert, burning sand becoming a pool. And God’s beloved will travel a highway, the Holy Way, returning to the new Jerusalem – the one rebuilt after the Exile. A healed world.

“And everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

A world of joy; a wounded world rebuilt in God’s image of love where the crocus breaks through the cold, hard ground, heralding spring and new life, rejoicing as it does. The land is watered and fed. Creatures live in harmony. And all people are healed. Then all God’s children will rejoice.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. Usually when we wait and prepare, we give thought to whatever we await, whatever we are preparing for. So, let us

consider how God is calling us, preparing us to bring love to our world this Christmas.

Let us ponder how God is calling us

to look beyond rules and boundaries and ways that society limits love.

to water the dry earth; tending creation and protecting other creatures that dwell with us on this planet.

to see Jesus in the face of the marginalized and struggling, to listen to their stories, and to serve or advocate for them.

to help the wounded heal whether their wounds are physical or emotional.

to live in harmony with and uplift others, especially those rejected or oppressed by society.

to walk with others along the holy way of love to build a more compassionate, just, and equitable world.

Let us not look back and say, I would have or I could have or I should have...

God does not expect us to do it all. God does not expect us to be saviors. Jesus is the Savior of the World, and we again celebrate his birth. But God looks for us to be partners in God's plan. And Jesus is with us. That same Holy Spirit that came upon Mary will guide us.

So, let us hear God's angel say, "Be not afraid." Let us dream. Let us listen to our dreams and share God's dream.

*article found at Baptistnews.com/article/when-obeying-God-means-disobeying-the-bible/#.Ybgtsn3MLbc

