

Christmas Unwrapped: *God's Timing* - Advent wk 3

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Dec. 13, 2020

“No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.” Luke 9:62 MSG

A curious bit of information has surfaced from the writings of the second century church father Justin Martyr. He reports that in his day (c. 130 A.D.) plows and yokes made by Joseph and Jesus were still in existence. 100 years after Jesus made them. Wow! Wouldn’t Sotheby’s have a field day with that at auction? What do you think a piece of farm equipment handmade by Joseph—let alone Jesus—would bring at auction? And it’d be an item of high interest on the Antiques Roadshow.

When the angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, there were plenty of reasons why Joseph *should* be afraid. Words like adultery, disgrace, divorce, shame, and the potential for being shunned by family and friends must have ricocheted through his mind. The stakes were high—higher than for any other family in the history of the world. But when you truly decide to do God’s will, there’s no turning back. Joseph had long ago put his hand to the plow of obedience and he refused to look back. Perhaps when Jesus later spoke about the cost of discipleship to the man who was full of excuses, he had the example set by Joseph to look back on.

At Jesus’ birth, we can imagine a troubled Joseph pondering his options. Probably, tired from the journey,

possibly, discouraged by the inhospitable accommodations: surely, nothing had gone as he would have planned. Did he hear discouraging thoughts like, *“Surely you don’t really believe Mary is innocent, do you? Why would a loving God put you through such an ordeal? There is a way out, you know.”*

During difficult times we may have similar thoughts. Sometimes Satan may attempt to hold us back by discouragement like that. But we can be encouraged by Joseph’s faithfulness and the good that came from it.

Has God ever asked you to do something that seemed utterly impossible—or incredibly scary? How did you respond? In what ways did Satan try to discourage you? What did you learn about trust in the process?

Or is God asking you to do something right now and you’re reluctant to say “yes”? Is this the year to drop Christmas gift giving to \$10 per person—and give the rest to the poor? Or to invite a homeless family to have Christmas dinner with you? The American Dream says *“you can and should have it all”*. Christ says, *“Don’t look back to what the world offers or what you should have. Look forward to the good you can do for His Kingdom.”*

When God wants us to follow Him into an unknown future, and the future is always unknown, let’s not let the unknown, prevent us from doing good. How many neighbors are getting put off for a time, because we’re just

unsure what the New Year, let alone next week, will bring. Let's find a way to do the good of the Kingdom in this challenging time.

I think we most often hesitate, because we'd rather have control over our future, before we take a step. But let's be honest, how much control have we ever really had in life? Do we have much control over the timing of things in our lives? We have been given self-control and can use it to take steps of faith to live our God given values, even if we know we don't have control over the events of our world.

2020 has come and gone and this is possibly the most difficult year we've had for the world since World War 2. Covid 19 has literally challenged and changed the planet. We are reminded of how little control we have over our earthly existence, regardless of how rich we are or how hard we try.

James 4:14 states, "You don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? It is a mist that appears for a little while. Then it disappears." We don't have control over world events. And that's ok, that'd be too much to handle. And it's ok, because of who has control: our heavenly Father, and that's a good thing, because He is good.

Have you ever felt like you have absolutely no control over your life—or at least over significant portions of it? Perhaps a serious illness keeps affecting your body's health. Or you have lost your job and you fear your

unemployment benefits are going to run out before you get another one. Perhaps a personal relationship is crumbling and you feel helpless to turn things around. We are used to feeling like we have some control in our lives, but then it's frightening when we realize we don't have as much control as we think we do.

Consider the Christmas story again, when the angel appeared to Joseph, Mary's pregnancy was already a done deal. No room for negotiation there. **“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** Matthew 1:20-21 NIV

And when an angel appeared to Mary, he didn't ask if she would like to carry God's child. He said, in all kindness, **“You will...”** (Luke 1:31). **“But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.’”** Luke 1:30-33 NIV

They could have chosen to rebel against God's plan, but the end result of such rebellion would have been personal chaos. This was God's plan for their lives—and for the world.

While Mary and Joseph did not initiate God's plan, they did have control over how they would respond to it. Despite the hardships that lay ahead of her, Mary chose to respond with joy—**“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”** Luke 1:46. Despite uncertain days ahead, Joseph responded with obedience—**“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him...”** Matthew 1:24.

For similar stories, we need look no further than our own friends and relatives who have responded to life threatening illnesses by giving glory to God. There truly are saints among us. When the unemployment future looks bleak, the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that, **“There is a time for everything...”** Ecclesiastes 3:1 Or as the saying goes, *“God has not brought us this far to put us to shame.”*

When relationships fail, the God of the universe grieves right along with us. (See I Samuel 15:35 when God grieved with Samuel.) In God's timing, wounds will be healed, jobs will be available, broken relationships will be mended. And the Babe in the manger became the Savior of the world.

So many people have suffered this year from illness, unemployment, wildfires, floods, tornados and hurricanes. Children have been unable to attend live schools, places of worship closed in some states, and businesses shuttered. We have endured a contentious election and

changing of leadership. Our nation and world were shaken by significant deaths this year and we were presented the discussion: who brings and upholds justice authorities or citizens?

Yet in our troubled world, we approach Christmas, and the hope of new beginnings. As a baby, Jesus entered into a very troubled world. Israel and all the surrounding countries were crushed under the tyranny of Rome. War, pestilence, famine and hardship were everywhere. But Matthew 1:23 declared the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, **"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means 'God with us'"** and He would become the Prince of Peace and the Savior of the world.

As we reflect on Christmas. Let us all love our spouses, children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents and cherish them. Too many have experienced loss this year to not cherish them in this moment we've been given. Please consider helping someone else who is in need this Christmas.

As our congregant, Ruby Kleymann who lives at the Manor recently wrote, *"We need to remember that God is in charge and in control and God blesses us immensely even in these days. We just need to keep our eyes open and look for the blessings."* I totally agree. If we look for the good that God is doing, we will see it.