

December 3, 2017
Matthew 1:18-25
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“Why Me?”

Good morning! I am excited about the Advent season at Creekside and the planning and preparation which has been done by Worship and Outreach Teams, and others who will be participating in special ways. Several months ago I was at Michael’s craft store -- a place I wander through a lot -- and saw a printed pillow that had the letters A D / V E N T and my brain registered the word Advent, before I read the third line, which had the letters U R E. The pillow actually had the word “adventure” on it, which is kind of an oxymoron, really, because an adventure is sort of the opposite of sitting in a chair with a comfy pillow. But it made me realize that Advent, the season of the Christian year the four weeks before Christmas, might be more of an *adventure* than we often imagine it to be.

The root that these words share is the Latin advent, or to come. It can also mean to reach, or to arrive. In its noun form as a thing, rather than an action, an adventure is an experience in which we participate: often there’s an element of danger involved -- experiences like sky diving, rock climbing, international travel, or going shopping at Wal-Mart on Black Friday can all be adventures. An adventure can also be a story that we’re told or which we read or that we see as a movie: it can be a real-life adventure like the story of Ernest Shackleton’s Antarctic exploration, or an imaginary adventure like Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan series, or the Star Wars films. There’s another definition, too. A shortened form of adventure is a venture. We tend to use venture in terms of a business or financial project, but what connects it to adventure is the element of danger, or the risk of loss. Adventures are risky -- they don’t have safe, predictable outcomes.

So this season I’m going to ask you to put the comfy throw pillows away. If we think the gospel accounts of the Jesus’ conception, his

parents' travel away from their home in Nazareth, and his birth in Bethlehem is just a warm fluffy tale to read with a cup of hot chocolate, than we have missed the adventure of this story. If we dismiss this all as something that happened a long time ago in a Galilee far, far away, we have missed the point of this story. This adventure is our story, because it is God's story: the story of a Creator who made a beautiful garden for the people He loved, and how those people turned their backs on God time and time again, but God still loved them and called them back to repentance and faithfulness and gave them another chance. Some people whom we call prophets heard the voice of God and spoke directly to the people and predicted that God was planning something extraordinary. The prophets pleaded with God to tear open the heavens and come down, and shake up the world.

This is the adventure of how God came down to us. As the prophets asked, but not the way they expected. Remember, adventures don't have safe, predictable outcomes: even for God. God's story isn't completed yet: you and me, all of us, are characters in the ongoing story of Jesus Christ and the completion of God's plan. If the entire scope of creation and eternity seems like kind of a tall order for one sermon, or even for a four-week series, fear not. We're going to tell this story one character at a time. And we're going to begin with a character who you know; if you don't know him from the Bible, you've surely met someone like him in your adventure of real life. He's an ordinary guy--practical, down-to-earth. He doesn't care much for the theoretical--he's not a philosopher who ponders big ideas. This guy works with his hands, and he has the tools and the splinters that go with it. He may not have a lot of education, but he's no fool. He always tries to do his best work, and do the right thing, he just doesn't have to go around talking about it all the time, he's content with knowing that his work speaks for itself. He has integrity. He's reliable, loyal, practical. If you need something done, he'd be the first one you'd talk to. I bet you know people like this. I do; some of them are in this room. These are masculine qualities -- you don't have to be a man to embody them, but the man in this story has a lot of the qualities we value in men: a responsible person who takes care of himself, provides for his family, does exemplary work, and tries to do the right thing.

This man is about to get his life blown apart. That's what happens in adventures: your life seems safe and predictable, and something happens that sends safe and predictable out the window. This adventure was *not* Joseph's idea. Joseph was doing the normal and expected thing, he was engaged to a good girl, constructing his life with the same care and thoroughness that he'd frame a house. And then his betrothed comes to him and says she's going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. Let me tell you, even 2,000 years ago, people knew where babies come from, and it isn't usually the Holy Spirit. Joseph is a good man, but he's not an idiot. What do solid, reliable people do when a bomb gets dropped in the middle of their plans for the future?

The gospel of Matthew doesn't give us any details of that conversation between Mary and Joseph: they probably were not alone for that conversation -- once girls were old enough to be married -- and that might have been at age 13 or 14--they were not allowed to be alone with a man who was not a family member -- even their husband-to-be. What Matthew does tell us is that Joseph did what we would expect a man like him to do: damage control. Going public with this would embarrass him, but under Jewish law Mary could have been stoned for adultery. He doesn't want her humiliated or killed, but obviously he can't go through with the engagement. He plans to break it off.

And then Joseph does a surprising thing. Something we might not expect. He chooses to step out of his safe and predictable life, and enter the adventure of God's story. Joseph makes a choice which is not especially safe or rational, and it's certainly not ordinary. Joseph listens to an angel; a word from God which comes in a dream. I doubt if Joseph had ever heard from an angel before: Joseph is not a mystic: he's a carpenter. Changing plans based on what an angel says in a dream is huge leap of faith. Joseph is not only doing something he's never done before, he's doing something NO ONE has ever done before. What will it be like to raise a son who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and will save the people from their sins? Who knows?

I imagine this dream raised a lot more questions than it answered. Matthew 1:24 makes it sound pretty simple: "So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary as the angel of the Lord told him to do." I doubt

if it was quite that simple. Nazareth was a hick town, but I bet even there you didn't just roll out of bed and get married. Joseph had to be wrestling with some big questions. Sue Noffsinger wrote the monologue you heard this morning, and I think she got right to the heart of what Joseph was dealing with. One question, two words: Why me?

Maybe you have asked yourself or God that question before: Why is this happening to me? What have I done to deserve this? You know that insurance commercial -- I think it's for Allstate -- when you hear the same dialogue from two people and it means something completely different for each person? The teenager who gets a new car and says "Oh, this is crazy! I can't believe it!" and the guy who has had his tires stolen and says, "Oh, this is crazy. I can't believe it." Why me? Can be an expression of self-pity: Oh, I'm so miserable, my life is so hard. Why me? Joseph must have had some of these feelings of self-pity. You have to feel for the guy. But no one steps into an adventure because they just feel so sorry for themselves. There is not much God can do with my feelings of life not being fair, and it's too much work, and nobody knows how *hard* it is for me. Legitimate feelings, but if Joseph felt like that, he got over himself and got on with what the angel told him to do.

Why me? Why was Joseph, an ordinary guy, chosen to be the earthly father of a child like no one on earth had ever known? Why would God give anyone that kind of responsibility? Who could possibly be worthy of that role? For that matter, why us? Maybe you haven't had angels direct you in a dream, but your presence here today means you are actively participating, or at least actively interested in being part of the adventure of God's story. How can we possibly be worthy of being part of the kingdom of God? There will likely be some danger, and certainly some risk. We know how God's story is going to end (spoiler alert: Christ wins), but we don't know what's going to happen between here and there.

Joseph may be looking a little forlorn up on the chancel by himself this morning. Don't worry; he'll soon be joined by others in this adventure. He may be feeling a little sorry for himself -- that conversation with Mary was a game changer. But he is not alone. He's being guided by an angel; he's allowing himself to be used by

God for a purpose that will change the world. The question Why Me? rarely has a simple answer. If Joseph had allowed himself to stay stuck in self-pity, this would have been a different story. It would have been much safer for Joseph to break the engagement quietly. But Joseph was aware enough to listen when an angel came to him, and courageous enough to do what the angel told him to do. By choosing to follow where God was leading, Joseph's Why Me? Becomes an expression of humility, wonder, and praise. Why Joseph? Why any of us? Why not? We'll pick up more of the story next Sunday.