

SERMON: "Being Prepared: Saying Yes To God's Love"

Preached December 23, 2007

Based on MATTHEW 1:18-25

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We have looked at three ways of being prepared for the coming of Christ this Advent Season.

We have 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.

We have 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 neighbors and our God and follow in the path shown to us by Jesus,

And I have asked you to consider how God grants the gift of joy to those whose hands are open to give and receive the blessings that God pours out on us.

Today - as we see Christmas approaching, I want us to know the importance of saying "Yes" to God's love and how our saying yes to love can enable the world to witness BIRTH, a new and marvelous thing,

Saying YES to God's love prepares us and others for the coming of the Messiah.

You know the Christmas Story is strongly reliant upon something that most people find very strange. *It is reliant upon two people saying yes to God*, and they say YES in most unusual circumstances: to a proposal that seems most strange indeed.

We are all keenly 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?

Engaged to be married, she is suddenly to be with child by one who is not the man she loves. The risks are tremendous.

And what is this child of God's love to be?

What is this child that she says yes to when she opens her life so totally to God?

At the time that Mary conceived there were many Messiahs, many folk who proclaimed that they had been chosen of 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.

There were many Messiahs at the time Mary conceived. Most of these were either ridiculed or were killed or both. So why would her child - this child that she was told would be of God - be any different?

Truly Mary had a lot to store up in her heart and ponder, as the scriptures tell us over and over again that she did, she had not only to store up the angel greetings and the words of shepherds and wise men and prophets, she had to ponder what all these would do with 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 the odd man out in the Christmas Story, isn't he?

I read a story about how once a worried mother phoned the church office on the afternoon before the annual Christmas program to say that her small son, who was to play the role of Joseph in the

Christmas Pageant, had a cold and had gone to bed on doctor's orders.

"It's too late now to get another Joseph," the director of the play said. "We'll just have to write him out of the script."

And they did! Joseph just disappeared! And few of those who watched that night actually realized that Joseph was missing."

Joseph is often forgotten. But consider his role in bringing Jesus into this world for a minute. 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 in a ruin.

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? 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 marry her either, in fact he had resolved to cancel their betrothal 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 to be his wife.

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.
- It would bring to them the same things we too receive if we too say Yes to God.

You know the promise is to us - as well as to Mary and to Joseph. 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 no 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 misleading rule: "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 hurt or pain because of how (albeit 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 humankind.

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. They came to Mary. They came to Joseph. They 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 get through those ordeals.

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, puts 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 very hard

- when we do see others full of joy and expectation, and we have in ourselves little more than a sense of pain and loss,
- It is very 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,
 - than saying yes to the wonderful gift that God offers us through Christ our Lord.

There are no 'shoulds' at Christmas other than the should of saying yes to God's love, and that should always comes 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.

I have talked to you over this Advent Season about being prepared for the coming of Christ into our lives.

I have spoken about hope - about peace - about joy - and now about love.

I urge you as you prepare for Christmas day to 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.

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 the rough places smooth.

He will come and as he did at the creation of the world and at the tomb of Jesus He will bring order 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.