

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church
December 20, 2020
Rev. Sharon Patch
PREPARING FOR THE BIG DAY
LUKE 2:1-5

Well, the big day is almost here. Are you ready? I'm ready! I've been ready for weeks. I decorate early. I shop early. I bake early. I plan and I prepare well in advance for the big day. While the big day this year will not involve as many family as normal, it is still a time to reach out and touch family members and friends in some way to let them know that I'm thinking of them and love them dearly. Christmas is all about love.

Our advent candle for today is the candle of love. We learn a great deal about what it means to love in the Bible. John tell us that God is love. We are told that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that we might have life both abundant and eternal.

Paul tells the church in Corinth what love looks like. I guess they weren't being very loving toward one another. He says in I Cor. 13: (On screen 10:30 only)

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil it rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails.

One thing stands out when you read this passage about love. This kind of love is not about emotions. It is not about passion or attraction. This kind of love is about how we behave toward one another. When we are stressed and tired and a bit depressed, it is not easy to behave as Paul describes.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are all feeling stressed with last minute things to do, with not enough time and not enough money. It's the same every year but add COVID to the mix and it becomes even more difficult. We all know that this year will be different.

We may find it a bit depressing. There will be fewer opportunities to gather with family and friends. Fewer presents under the tree because of financial concerns. Fewer opportunities to party and have fun. Less excitement. Even here at church, we know things are going to be different. We will miss the large crowds that normally flood our sanctuary on Christmas Eve.

However, the reason for the season has not changed. We will celebrate the birth of Jesus. Let's just do our best to focus on God's gift of love to us and on expressing our love for his son, Jesus. Let's attempt to love one another. If we can express love in all that we are and all that we do, we will be celebrating Christmas in a way that truly brings honor and glory to God and truly celebrates Jesus' birth.

This is our last Sunday in Advent. Our last week to prepare for the birth of Jesus. Let's see how we got here.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we looked at the story and the song of Zechariah and Elizabeth and we lit the candle of hope. They had long hoped and prayed for a child. Their prayers were answered but not until they were senior citizens. It was a miracle provided by God as a way to prepare Israel for the coming of their Messiah.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we looked at the story and the song of Mary, who learned that she was to become the mother of our Savior...another miracle. We know that this child that Mary was to bear would become the Prince of Peace. We lit the candle of peace.

Then last week we looked at the story of Joseph. Joseph learned that the woman he was engaged to marry was pregnant with a child that wasn't his. An angel appeared in a dream to explain that the baby she was carrying was indeed a miracle and would become the Savior they had long awaited. This baby would bring joy to all of Israel. We lit the candle of joy.

This morning we are going to journey forward with Joseph and Mary as they prepare for the birth of this baby.

LUKE 2:1- 6. (On screen 10:30 only)

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born."

Today I want to look at how Joseph and Mary loved each other and how that love sustained them and how their love for God enabled them to fulfill their purpose in life. Giving birth and becoming parents to Jesus, the Son of God.

Let's look at how their story began. No doubt their engagement had been arranged by their families. Perhaps even when Mary was still a child. We don't know how old Joseph was but it is likely he was a little older than Mary since he already had a career as a carpenter.

Last week we learned of Joseph's struggle. Before the angel appeared to him in a dream, the scriptures say that he was going to divorce Mary quietly so as not to cause her shame. This was a loving choice. Then after the angel appeared and explained that the child she was carrying was indeed the Son of God, and that Joseph should go ahead and marry her and become the earthly father to her baby, Joseph did just that. This was a loving choice.

Now, this morning we have come to the point in the story where the Emperor Augustus decreed that a census would be taken. Israel was under Roman occupation so they had no choice in the matter. A census was for the purpose of taxation. A census was taken every fourteen years or any time a new ruler came into power, or just whenever the ruler decided to do it. So, this was not unusual. The scripture says that they had to go to their own towns, in other words their ancestral hometown, to be registered. Joseph and Mary both lived in Nazareth at the time, but Joseph's family was from Bethlehem. So, Joseph had to make the 70 mile journey to Bethlehem.

Now, Mary may not have had to go with him. Joseph could have registered for both of them. This raises the question: Why did a pregnant Mary decide to accompany Joseph on a 70 mile trip if she didn't have to do so. Remember, this was not in some comfy car or even a lovely horse and buggy. This was primarily on foot and on the back of a donkey.

Ask any pregnant woman today if she would like to hoof it from here to Orlando and see what she says. My guess would be...NO WAY!

So, why would Mary do it? LOVE! Mary's love for God and perhaps her desire to fulfill her mission and the prophesy of Isaiah who said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Also, her love for Joseph. Maybe she was so grateful that Joseph had fulfilled their marriage contract that she felt she had to express her appreciation in a meaningful way and going with him would do that. Maybe she just didn't want to stay home alone.

Maybe it was Joseph's love. His love for God and his willingness to fulfill the mission God's angel had given him. Also, his love for Mary. Perhaps he didn't want to leave Mary to deal with the family, friends and neighbors, who no doubt were gossiping and pointing fingers and counting months on their fingers. Remember there's no account of angels appearing to the residents of Nazareth to explain why this young girl was with child. Perhaps Joseph was afraid for her safety. Perhaps Joseph just wanted his new wife at his side.

We have no way of knowing why but we do know they made the journey together. We also don't know how far along in her pregnancy Mary was. While we usually think that she was ready to deliver, if you look at the scripture closely, you will notice it says that the baby arrived while they were in Bethlehem. It doesn't say how long they were there before the baby arrived.

Bethlehem was where Joseph's family had their roots. It was like going home for him. Here, he and Mary would be welcome. This trip was a necessity brought about by the Emperor. But, it was also an opportunity to escape the stares and perhaps less than loving behavior of the people of Nazareth.

We have no record of the journey. It would have taken several days to travel the 70 miles. There were no hotels or restaurants along the way. No tourist attractions to break up the journey. Not even rest areas where a pregnant woman could "rest." If you've ever been pregnant, you know that "resting" is a physical necessity that occurs frequently. There's no mention of how they prepared food or how they carried enough food with them for the journey. And, we know that there were often robbers that hid in the hills and attacked travelers, so this was not some luxurious honeymoon for Joseph and Mary. It was definitely a difficult and dangerous journey.

Yet, they were together and they finally arrived in Bethlehem. Now, again, there were no hotels or motels. In older translations of this portion of the Gospel of Luke, we are told there was no room for them in the inn. However, in more modern translations we read that there was no guest room available for them.

It is likely that Joseph and Mary called on extended family members living in Bethlehem when they arrived. Under normal circumstances, they would have been welcomed and given the guest room. However, because everyone in the family had to return to Bethlehem to be registered, the town was full as were the guest rooms of Joseph's family.

Now, we usually think of Joseph and Mary being housed in a stable, it is quite likely that this interpretation is a bit off, as well. At that time, families brought their animals inside their homes at night and there was an area in the center of the house where the animals were protected from thieves and were prevented from wandering away. Also, the animals provided warmth on cold nights. So, Joseph and Mary were given a place to stay near the animals where they, too, would be safe and warm.

While it may have been the night they arrived in Bethlehem, it may have been a bit later. All we know for sure is that it was here in this place that Mary and Joseph became parents to the Son of God.

Now, no spoiler alert needed here. The story will be concluded on Christmas Eve, so if you want to hear the rest, join us at 4, 7, or 11 on the 24th.

The important thing now is for each one of us to prepare and be ready to welcome him. We need to make room in our lives for Jesus. We can sing carols, give gifts, bake cookies, and decorate with bright reds and greens, but if we do not have love for Jesus and for one another, we are just clanging cymbals...making a lot of noise but accomplishing nothing worthwhile.

Do you love Jesus this morning? Are you ready...ready for him to be born in you?

Have you carved out a spacious place in your life where he can live and grow in you? Or is he still in a nasty corner of the stable amidst the filth and debris. Why not make room for him and welcome him to come and be born anew in you this morning.