

CHRISTMAS HOPE IN A HOPELESS WORLD

Hope and Trust

Matthew 1:18-25

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December 18, 2016

LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/christmas-hope-in-a-hopeless-world-hope-and-trust/>

Several years ago Janet and I went on one of those dolphin sighting cruises in St. Petersburg, FL. As the dolphins came alongside the boat and raced us, the guide pointed out they weren't really swimming--they were letting the wake of the boat pull them along. How can we hope in a world falling apart, when our plans fail, when all hope seems gone? By admitting we can't do it by ourselves and trusting in God and allowing God to pull us.

In our text, we see that Joseph had a plan. He had it all lined out. He was in control. And then he wasn't. Mary was pregnant by a mysterious, divine act. Humanly speaking Joseph was out of hope. If he abandoned Mary, she might have been stoned to death as per Jewish law; if he publicly shamed her, she would be a single mother likely resorting to prostitution to survive. If he remained in a relationship with her, he would be considered as "religiously" tainted as Mary. And then there was the matter of all those village busybody gossips! Talk about hopeless!

Look at v. 18. We are reminded that God's greatest work is often accomplished amid interruptions. And our greatest opportunities are often in those same interruptions. And vv. 19-20 remind us that our plans are written with pencils, not permanent markers.

Do you know where I find the real turning point of this story? The place where it really hinges and bends in a new direction? It's not Mary and Joseph's engagement, or the discovery that she is pregnant, or even Joseph's dream. The real moment of drama is when Joseph wakes (v. 24), and he has to decide if he will trust--and if he will obey based on that trust. He could have chosen any number of responses: anger, frustration, self-pity, irritation (that's one of my favorites, when MY plans don't develop). But he chose to trust that God would bring things around correctly.

Mary's pregnancy created a crisis for Joseph and he was out of his league. He had nothing to bring to the problem, except his trust in God. Nadia Bolz-Weber has written that "nothing" is God's favorite thing to work with. God sees us, our lack, our need, our nothing and God says, "Now that's something I can work with!" [*Pastrix*, p. 106]. When we get to the end of ourselves, and lose hope, that's when God can work.

Scholars like to point out that biblical hope does not depend upon our moods but on the substance the one guaranteeing the hope--God's character. God's trustworthiness.

Remember that the name Jesus means "God saves" (v. 21). God saves; we don't save ourselves. Maybe you have been wanting to give your life to Christ but afraid you can't live up to it, or you are cherishing a prideful notion that you can figure it out yourself. Here Jesus' name. It means GOD saves, not us. There are a lot of demands in Matthew (put God first, turn the other cheek, forgive), but those are rungs in the ladder of salvation; those are fruits of God first saving you. God saves us, and then we live for Him, not the other way around.

But "Jesus" isn't the only name given to Jesus at his birth. He is also named "Emmanuel" (v. 23), God with us. God not only delivers; God stays with us always. Can you trust that this is true? That God loves you so much that He loved you before you were born and will love you throughout eternity. God with us--there is no place you can go where God is not. You are never alone. No crisis, no heartache, no problem, no sin, no death is bigger than God. Here is the

relationship of hope and trust: The future is not a time of fear and terror; it's the place where God is already working! [I am indebted to the late Peter Gomes for this thought, *Best Sermons*, Vol. 1, ed. Cox, p. 338].

A few years ago, I read an account of a boy who was out fishing in a creek in the midst of a heavily wooded area. He had tied up the old mare, Bell, and she was waiting patiently. He fished until a violent thunderstorm came up. He knew the danger of lightening among all the trees, so he jumped on Bell and tried to exit the woods. But he couldn't find the path out. Finally, he remembered the words of his older brother, "If you just drop the reins, old Bell will take over. She knows the way." And he did. And she did. For the rest of his life, when he came up against things too big, he would hear God's words, "Just drop the reins and trust." This is our way out of fears, anxieties, hopelessness. God saves. God is with us.