DECEMBER 7, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON ***"Who We Are: Mary & Joseph" Matthew 1:18-24, Luke 1:26-38***

This week we begin the Advent season. The theme is going to be "Who are we?" This question is important to ask ourselves. Who we are as individuals and as a congregation. There is another question that is alongside this one that is important. "Who am I called to be by God?"

The significance is that the gap between who I am and who God calls me to be is the area of growth. It tells me the work I need to do to get from where I am to where God wants me to be.

We'll be looking at these questions through the lens of the Biblical figures we see in the Christmas story. This week we will consider Mary and Joseph.

The first thing about this couple that should be striking is also encouraging. They are incredibly ordinary. There is no sense that either of them stand out magnificently from their community. They are a young Jewish woman and a Jewish man engaged to one another and likely planning to marry and have a typical family.

Mary is an ordinary Jewish woman. Most likely her father wed her to Joseph with a bride price or some other arrangement. Property of one man passed on as property of another man.

Joseph is an ordinary Jewish man. He is a builder of some sort with a pliable trade. For whatever reason he has acquired Mary as a bride and they are awaiting their wedding day.

Then God intervenes.

Mary is startled and afraid. After her angelic conversation she agrees to go along and bear the Christ. In Luke she even grows to celebrate the privilege. There is the "song of Mary" or what many call the Magnificat where she sing the joy of having this honor.

Joseph is apparently uniquely gracious. Rather than make a spectacle when his bride to be is found pregnant, not by him, he is at least willing to end the engagement quietly. The breaking it off would be perfectly ordinary for them. Yet after his own angelic visit he agrees to carry one with Mary. He will take on the impossible stress of being an earthly father to the heavenly child.

Here is the first answer to who we are and called to be. We are ordinary. Every one of us. In our present day this isn't palatable to many. We teach that everyone is special, gifted, has expertise, and carries intrinsic value and worth. Ordinary sounds mundane and like an insult.

It isn't.

I agree that we are all special, gifted, have a specific area of expertise, and carry intrinsic value an worth. When everyone matches this description, all of it is ordinary. Everyone is all of that.

What makes things interesting is that in our ordinariness, our giftedness and expertise is often unique to the individual. Even if we are ordinary, we aren't cookie cutter cutouts. We are still individual.

That individuality is what opens us up for the moments of extraordinary. When our individual uniqueness, giftedness, expertise, and so on are called forward by God to contribute to the world. Ordinary becomes extraordinary.

And note, extraordinary doesn't mean big splash or spectacle or immediate boom in the world. Extraordinary is simply what is used of God to accomplish something wonderful and uncommon into the world.

I believe part of what made Mary and Joseph open to embrace the extraordinary task to which they were called was that they were ordinary and they knew it. Embracing ordinary means being humble. We aren't better than anyone else. We are no more or less deserving of anything than anyone else. We are simply who we are, humble before God and living into the calling to which we are called. Sometimes that calling might be elevated.

Humility is what opens our heart to say "yes" to the uncommon, extraordinary call of God. How often have we, or someone we know, said "no" because of feeling too good for the call? "It's too inconvenient". "I don't want to take the time". "I'm better than that". "Let someone else do it". "What will people think?"

All of this is the pride that gets in the way of answering extraordinary calling.

The humility of ordinary is often required to bend the knee to the extraordinary call of God. Because God's calling isn't necessarily convenient, safe, or comfortable in the moment.

Mary and Joseph show us that despite all of that, when God is in the equation the end result is beyond extraordinary. It is soul changing, world changing, and eternal.

Lesson one. Embrace being ordinary. Let it humble us to the calling of God whatever it might be.

The next question is really quite simple. How would we treat Mary and Joseph as the innkeeper, or when they arrived in Egypt fleeing Herod? This is a very "who are we" question.

The innkeeper had no clue who Mary and Joseph were. Mary was LITERALLY bearing the identity of Jesus in her womb. I wonder how he would have reacted if he knew the child she was carrying.
When they fled Herod they were literally fleeing nations. Judea at the time wasn't part of Rome. It paid tribute to Rome as a vassal state but wasn't a formal Roman province. That wouldn't happen until years after the birth of Jesus.
Herod the Great was a ruler that knew how to keep control. Because of this Rome let them do their own thing. After he died, his son Archilaeus made a mess of things. As a result Rome took Judea in as a province to keep it under control. It divided Judea into 4 areas as a provinces. This is why we hear of Herod the Tetrarch. He was one of Herod's sons who ruled on quarter of Herod's territory. Monarch…one full territory, Tetrach…on territory divided into four with four rulers.
This made it safer for them. It wasn't like going from Pennsylvania to Ohio under the US banner. It was more akin to US to Canada.
I wonder how they were welcomed in Egypt given all of this. How would we welcome them here?
While I agree that we need to cut the people then some slack because they truly had no idea who Mary, Joseph, or the baby Jesus were, I think we can faithfully and fairly ask a question of ourselves. The question is giving that we know who Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are.
Knowing this, how would we welcome them at the inn? How would we welcome them coming from far off, persecuted, and trying to find some peace just to raise their child?
We can try to put ourselves then and there and speculate. But we don't need to,
Jesus actually does that for us. Not long ago we noted that in Matthew 25 Jesus makes the statement that anyone we find in need bears His image. Whomever is among the least of these is Jesus.
He demonstrates this by coming alongside the woman caught in adultery. He eats and hangs out with the ones the religious rejected. The lepers, whom people avoided like a literal plague He encountered and engaged. The dirty Samaritan woman, likely shunned for several reasons, He sate with, talked with, and embraced. Judas, the betrayer, He fed from His own hand at the Last Supper. And so on and so forth.
When I ask how I'd receive the holy couple of Mary and Joseph and the newborn Messiah I simply have to ask an honest question.
How would I receive:
The addict?
The felon?
The sex worker?
The criminal?
The stranger?
The different?
Name anyone society has pushed to the side, shamed, or made to feel like they don't matter as much as the rest of us. That is how I receive Jesus.
Some might argue that some of these folks are in their predicament because of choice rather than circumstance. So are all of us and so were all those Jesus showed mercy on. The woman in adultery. The imprisoned. How many hungry were hungry because of poor choices? The Samaritan woman. Judas. The ones who crucified Him and for whom he asked forgiveness.
How I treat every person is how I treat Jesus.
It's no different than the innkeeper or those in the Egyptian town where Jesus, Mary, and Joseph settled for a time. I don't see the Savior in the person in the checkout line, or the faceless person I talk about when discussing politics and social concerns.
Yet He is there.
He came for them. Died for them. And is there to redeem them just like He is for me.
If I am called to love everyone just as Jesus did, who am I? Do I meet that measure?
In other words, do I consider myself ordinary enough, and humble enough, to give them the same grace, love, and mercy that I trust Christ gives to me?
We are all Mary and Joseph. We are ordinary people potentially called to extraordinary circumstances in order to bring God's love to bear in the world. It might be a moment, a season, or a lifetime measure.
We are all the innkeeper and the townspeople tasked with welcoming the Christchild. How will we do it? Will we do it with a Matthew 25 kind of grace and Spirit or a Herod like rejection?
This is the question before us each and every Advent. It is fitting to reflect on this as we prepare not only for Christmas, but for the new beginning of a new year.
May we be honest with ourselves and not only celebrate the grace that Jesus brings, but also the awakening that will close the gap between who we are and who we are called to be in the coming year.