

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent. How are your Christmas preparations coming along? Some have suggested this is the best time of the year and others have thought of it as the worst time of the year. With twelve days before Christmas, how's it going? I would suggest that many of us would like to do Christmas differently. We're not sure what that all means, but we know that something isn't quite right. I think this message today will help you to sort out what Christmas could look like, and even should look like. We will be studying a man named Joseph. His story is found in **Matthew 1:18-25**.

We will study what we learn about Joseph from this passage. But I wonder if you have had a preconceived idea about Joseph. How old is Joseph? unknown Throughout history Joseph has been typically ignored in the retelling of the Christmas story. Even the donkey Mary rides on during their journey in Bethlehem gets more press than Joe. We look for him in Christian art and we see that he appears infrequently and he is portrayed as a very old man . . . too old to be tempted by the lovely young Mary. But in Joseph we see the kind of person God chooses; the characteristics that are right for this Christmas.

Righteous (one word to describe Joseph) "Joseph . . . was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace . . ." (verse 19) This is a very broad word that also has a specific meaning. It comes from the idea of right standing. Moral righteousness or moral behaviors produced by human effort is only self-righteousness at best, and it can lead to pride, arrogance, hardheartedness, so that the person has to pretend that they really are upright. But because of Joseph's genuine connection with God he wanted to do what God desires.

☆ Right with God ☆

"For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." (2 Chronicles 16:9) "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) Notice that God isn't seeking someone with a high IQ or multiple talents, nor is he seeking the clever speaker or the person of influence. He has revealed where his true interests lie . . .

From the Inside Out —

- ✓ **Balanced** heart: Tough & Tender. We notice his concern for justice and love; his concern for truth and grace. God makes his heart full. "He (Joseph) had in mind to divorce her quietly." He desired to obey the Scripture because Mary was unfaithful, yet he was going to do it quietly because of his concern for Mary. His right heart with God responds in obedience with compassion just like our God. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." (Psalm 103:8) We read a few verses later, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him." (verse 11) How are you on this balancing scale of responding to life and people with both? If the scale is from 1-10, where to you land? _____ Why?
- ✓ **Listening** heart: "Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him . . ." (verse 24) Just think about Joseph's life. He was already doing something challenging by ending his relationship with Mary, who he obviously loved. Now he received revelation from God to do the opposite of his inclination. This wouldn't be any easier. He would be subject to ridicule and false accusation for moral failure in the fact that Mary was pregnant. But God knew he would listen. God entrusts his own son to a man who listens. "Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live." (Isaiah 55:2 & 3)
- ✓ **Because of Jesus**: Joseph is our character study today but he is not the centerpiece of the story. You know who the centerpiece of the story is. The prophet Isaiah foretold about Jesus, not Joseph. The title given Immanuel was for Jesus, not Joseph. The place of birth for the home of the Messiah was predicted for Jesus, not Joseph. Joseph gratefully allowed his son, the Messiah to be the center. Joseph was a nobody without him. "And he gave him the name Jesus." (verse 25)

Conclusion: How will this Christmas be different? Obviously I believe the way that Joseph responds is the right way. Taking on the characteristics of Joseph will make this Christmas different. It begins with Jesus. He's the center. It includes the sincere desire to hear from God; to listen to his guidance. It's a full heart that possesses the presence of God with both truth and grace. The bottom line is a characteristic of righteousness that means to be right with God. Who are you this Christmas?

Reflective Questions:

1. What do you like about Christmas? What are the best parts of Christmas and what are the worst parts of Christmas?
2. How do you think that people would describe you? What is one word that describes you? What is one word that describes Joseph? What does that say about him?
3. How did you rate yourself on the tough/tender scale, one being complete tough and ten being completely tender, knowing that neither alone is the kind of heart God is looking for?
4. How do we listen to God? Why is that so important? What is Christmas without Jesus? Who are you without Jesus? Think about it.

Reading Schedule for December 14-20

We will enjoy finishing up the book of Isaiah in our readings this week. Some encouraging words come as Isaiah concludes his message to the people of God 700 years before Christ was born. The very first sentence we will read this week is Isaiah 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” Jesus said that about himself in Luke 4. This coming Sunday we will launch our Christmas readings, which will carry us through the end of the year. I have an exciting plan for 2010. In the Life Application Bible there are 365 key passages suggested for a year through the Bible. Obviously we will not read every chapter in the Bible, but we will read some of the most significant chapters throughout this coming year. It will be a wonderful year in the Bible where we read approximately one chapter a day. Won't you consider committing yourself to reading every day these key passages from the Bible, beginning with Genesis and so on?

December 14: **Isaiah 61** – Each day I suggest you read through the chapter and pick out a verse that gets your attention and ask yourself what God might be saying to you through it. That's what I do every time. “. . . and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” (verse 3) These words really project a theme that I want to emphasize in the New Year. We could mourn; there are plenty of things to mourn about. We could despair because there are plenty of things that are discouraging. We could spread ashes over ourselves because there is plenty of sin to confess. But I would suggest a garment of praise. I am drawn to the oil of gladness. What would it be like to have 2010 be a year of celebration; that we would focus on the good that God has done and our celebration would be a display of his splendor even as we would be called oaks of righteousness? How does that idea sound to you? How are you at celebrating the good things that God has done for you?

December 15: **Isaiah 62** – “They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.” (verse 12) In the New Testament we are called saints, chosen ones, and we're described as accepted and forgiven. These titles in this verse describe new names that the Lord would give his people. Think of some of the names that are true about you because of what Jesus has done for you. “Redeemed” fits and “made righteous” works, “new creation” is also true; what new title would you remember? What does it mean to you to be called God's child?

December 16: **Isaiah 63** – “Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.” (verse 10) I like to read the positive verses that are about God's kindness and his mercy. There are statements about God's love and grace, but this one caught my attention. The phrase “grieved his Holy Spirit” is also in the New Testament. It means to willingly ignore or disobey the Holy Spirit's leading. It means to become more and more focused on yourself rather than on pleasing the Lord. You can get to a place where you aren't listening to God at all. It's as if the Lord turns his back on you and will use tough love to get your attention. Read Ephesians 4:28-32 for more on grieving the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to you to grieve the Holy Spirit? What are the results?

December 17: **Isaiah 64** – In this short chapter the verse that stood out to me was: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.” (verse 6) Again the Lord challenged me with the most difficult verse in the chapter rather than the most uplifting. I remember the phrase, “your righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Our best efforts fall far short of God's holiness. We cannot cleanse ourselves. We cannot match up to God's perfection. The message that Christ brought is that we can receive his righteousness when we place our faith in him. The New Testament teaches that we are declared righteous. Do your sins bother you? How much? What does forgiveness mean to you? How do you need to be forgiven?

December 18: **Isaiah 65** – Which verse in this chapter about judgment and salvation gets your attention? The one that I noticed was verse 17: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” Even the prophet realizes that in God's plan there is something new and permanent in the mind of God. It is about safety, peace and fellowship with God face to face. Revelation 21:1 speaks of the new heaven and the earth. The message that weeping and crying will be heard no more comes from Revelation 21:4. Why is heaven important? What do you think it means that there will be a new earth? How does this promise help you?

December 19: **Isaiah 66** – Which verse in this last chapter from the prophet Isaiah gets your attention? “See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the LORD.” (vv. 15 & 16) There is so much hope mentioned in the Bible, but there is also the reality of the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will release the wrath of God. 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 talk about this great judgment that occurs at Christ's second coming. Isaiah pictured a marvelous eternal future for us who know the Lord. But he also was honest about the devastation of those that reject the living God. How do these words motivate you? How important is it for us to share with this lost and wandering world the good news about Jesus? What is their destiny?

December 20: **Luke 1:26-56** – This section is the highlight for our message this morning at church. Mary is such an incredible character and we are going to take a look at her. You see her story in these verses stronger than at any other point in the Bible. You learn more about her in these verses than at any other place in the Scriptures. What is your impression of Mary? What verse stands out to you? What do you think I might say about Mary this morning in church? What would you emphasize? “‘I am the Lord's servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ Then the angel left her.” (verse 38)

Prayers: Pray for our outreach on Sunday, December 20th, that the message of Christ may touch many hearts. Pray for young families during this time when children are so eager for the fun of Christmas – may they especially draw near to the Lord and to each other. Also, pray that we will truly celebrate the Christmas message of God becoming one of us through his Son Jesus.