

God is Active in the Routine

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, January 6, 2016

The Second Sunday of Christmas (Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a (NRSV): Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 (NRSV): After the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! I hope that you all had a wonderful Christmas! The services were wonderful—the children and youth did a fantastic job at the family service, the adult and Youth choirs sang beautifully at the later services, the flowers and greens look fantastic, and the place was packed and filled with joy! Thank you to all those who helped to praise God for the gift of himself in Jesus this Christmas!

And perhaps you celebrated the New Year as well this past week. We have the feast of the Epiphany this Wednesday, but otherwise the fanfare and feasting and holidays are over, and now it's back to ordinary time! Decorations are coming down soon, offices will re-open, schools start classes again, and it's back to work and the routine and daily rhythm of life. Soon the joy of Christmas, and the connection to God's holy gift may be just a memory, and the daily grind of life will come into the foreground.

This pattern is like what we experience weekly: we come here on Sunday to connect with God, but then we go back to our routine and the secular rhythms of life beat out the sacred melodies of Sunday. On we go to our responsibilities, on to homework and chores, on to the daily duties of everyday life at work and home and church. Where is God in our regular routine? We recognize God at the high holy days, and we remember to pay attention and look for God at Christmas, but what about when the ornaments come down and we get back to work? Is God there in our work and our regular pace of life?

After the wonder of the incarnation, the message of angels, the gifts of the wise men, then what? Well, we see a glimpse of this transition in today's Gospel reading. We have heard the predictions of the angels and the joy of Mary. We have heard the choirs of angels sing God's praises with the shepherds. Before this section in the Gospel, we hear about the visit of the wise men bringing gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. After the wise men leave, Herod decides to eliminate the potential threat of a new messiah, so he orders the baby boys of the village to be killed. That's what we call the "Slaughter of the Innocents"—this is the story in the verses we skipped over in today's reading.

But before Herod sends his soldiers, an angel warns Joseph and directs him to flee to Egypt. Then later, God calls them back to Israel, and warned about Herod's son, they settle in Nazareth. This reading reminds us that Jesus came to this world with all its struggles, including danger and violence and abuse of power. And when the wonder of the angels is past and the kingly gifts are given, then God calls Joseph and his family back to the routine. It's as if God said, "OK, let's go." God's directions to Joseph are focused, and Joseph takes action: Get up, take the child and his mother and go to Egypt; remain there. He gets up, takes them, goes, remains. Again comes the call: get up, take, go. And again *go* to Nazareth.

Joseph is like many men—husbands and fathers who worry for their families. On his mind is work, family stress, keeping things together, providing, protecting, looking for the long term good of his family. This plays out in everyday life, in the routine of working a job, managing the resources, day by day. Joseph was faithful in the routine of each day, and God was faithful to Joseph. God gave him guidance and wisdom, revelation to dangers and opportunities. And in the daily faithfulness of Joseph and Mary, in the regular and unassuming commitment to God in the call of each day, they played a role in the greatest of God's acts in history! God is indeed active in daily faithfulness, and Joseph and Mary found God at work in the routine of their lives.

So when the angels had gone and the Magi had left and the gifts were packed away, was God still with them? When it was back to work with duties to family and God, was God there? Yes! God was present and active and strong!

Billy Graham pointed this out recently: we celebrate our children's birthdays, and they are worth celebrating, but the big impact comes in being there for them through the year: sharing meals, doing the chores, helping with homework, casual conversation while driving in cars, catching all the challenges and joys of daily life together.

In the same way, God continues to be there for us, and if we're attentive, we can invest in that relationship and find God at work in our daily faithfulness. Daily discipleship is a holy endeavor. This was the central theme of my Christmas message this year: that God is active in your life in your daily faithfulness, your daily discipleship following Jesus Christ, finding the gift of God in the moment before you!

We can find God at work in our daily routine in several ways. First of all, we start with the foundation of regular prayer and study and worship. Some people are amazing—they wake up at 5 AM, sit in the quiet with a cup of coffee and read scripture, pray for their family, meditate, run

five miles, write a novel, feed the hungry and get to work by 8AM. I'm not one of those people...

Even if I am up and going, I'm on autopilot for the first few hours. But if I'm at my best, I do remember to pray when I sit down to my desk, or in the stray minutes after lunch before I get back to my routine. I thank God for the day and ask for God's insight and guidance, and reflect on who I am in God's eyes and how God sees the world around me. I'm helped by having groups of people with whom to pray or study the Bible—I am part of a Bible Study on Tuesday nights, and there are others through the week that can support you. Just coming to worship also helps remind me to pray for things that aren't always on my mind—the struggles outside my radar, the needs of people I seldom see.

Onto that base layer of prayer and study and worship, how else can we find God at work in our daily lives? How do we participate with God's presence and power alive in our daily routine? We can look at the world through God's eyes and see what God sees in ourselves and others. We can love like Jesus loves, giving grace in the face of rejection or hurt. We can give the way God gives: sacrificially, joyfully offering what little we can offer to the benefit of others and God's glory. In these ways, we walk with God. Walking with God is like a walk with the family: if you do it enough, the family virtues will rub off.

Living close to God will nurture understanding, forbearance and forgiveness. Receiving God's unconditional love will grow in us hearts of grace. Knowing and feeling God's sacrificial generosity will give us both humility and gratitude for God's abundance.

Walking with God in daily faithfulness means responding to God too. What if you said a kind word to that grouchy girl in your English class? Even if she doesn't show it to you, a bit of grace, un-earned and undeserved, will chip away at the cynicism she feels inside. What if, in the rat race of year-end reports and catching-up after the holidays, you took a moment to pray for your colleague whose holidays were heavy with loss and stress and conflict? What if you took time to hear that story in the first place so that you knew how to pray? What if you called that neighbor whose wife died, just to take him out to lunch or share a walk in the park? What if, at each family dinner, you asked each person to name where God was active and present that day?

If you try these things, or in other ways pay close attention to God in your daily routine, what would you find God doing?

Like Joseph and Mary, you might find God sustaining you each day. Each day lifted up by God would add together into weeks, and weeks into months, and the hard days would be endurable because you would be able to recognize God with you. In this daily faithfulness, you might grow as a Christian and develop as a child of God, learning more of God's ways and God's strength in your life. In this daily discipleship—this daily following of Jesus—you might see God work through you, touching the lives of others in ways that they might not notice at first, but ways in which God's power can bring profound benefits, day by day, week by week in a life worth living—even in the routine.

When you head back into the routine this week, look for God—find God at work in your life and respond by dedicating all those routine moments to God. Share those times with God and open yourself to the blessings that God will bring. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians from which we heard this morning, I pray that God will give you “a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know...the hope to which he has called you...the riches of his glorious inheritance... and...the immeasurable greatness of his power...”

God bless you in the routine of each day!