



*Christmas Eve Morning
December 24, 2016
Ellis White, Pastoral Intern
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church*

Send Us Your Light: The Listening

Luke 2:25-35

Good morning and welcome to Chapel Hill, especially if you wouldn't normally worship with us, or you wouldn't describe yourself as a Christian. I'm so glad you decided to join us. My name is Ellis White and I'm a Pastoral Intern at Chapel Hill, and I want to start by inviting the kids up to join me

Kids, how many of you got to take a special photo for your Christmas card this year? Did any of you dress up for it? Well, apparently, some families dress up especially for their Christmas card, like this one [photo]. Nothing says Christmas like covering yourselves in green trash bags and tinsel, right? Or, this one [photo]. Dad always did love being the star of the show. Or, one of my favorites, this one [photo]. I mean, who doesn't dress up their cat like a sheep?

So, I thought we could create our own dress up Christmas cards this morning... I've picked three real Christmas cards of pictures of the nativity that we can recreate ourselves. So here I have a baby Jesus [doll]. I need a Mary [pick Mary]. And a Joseph [pick Joseph]. Okay, you two stand here. Perfect. So, here's the first Christmas card we need to recreate [photo of Mary/Jesus/Shepherds]. Okay, I need some shepherds, and a sheep, and a donkey. Oh, and Joseph, sorry, you're not in this one. Go stand over there. Great. [Pretend to take picture.] Okay, the next one [photo of Mary/Jesus/Wise Men]. Okay, I need some wise men... one, two, three... four. Okay, four wise men. But only three gifts, so I guess that's okay. Sorry, Joseph, still don't need you. [Pretend to take picture.] All right, last one [photo of Mary/Jesus/Animals]. Okay, wise men sit down. Donkey, back you come. And I need a cow. Joseph... sorry bud. [Pretend to take picture]. Thank you everyone!

Great pictures! But who was missing from them all? Joseph! And there's probably a reason why. Because Joseph seems only to have a minor role to play in the whole story. Those of you who were Joseph in the readings earlier—this section of the room here—did you notice that Joseph never spoke? And, it wasn't like Joseph had any role to play in getting Mary pregnant, was it? So, why is Joseph in the story? Well, I believe Joseph has a very important role in the Christmas story, giving us a picture of the scandalous grace of God, and I want us to look at his story this morning. Thank you kids! You can return to your seats.

So let me tell you the story of Joseph: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18)

Joseph was a man who lived 2000 years ago in a place we now call Israel. And he and Mary were engaged, although technically, it was called a betrothal. In that culture they would have been called husband and wife, could only have separated through divorce, but they still would not have consummated the relationship. Joseph was probably like most young men, planning and dreaming for his future life with Mary.

I remember being engaged to my wife Rachel and planning our future together. I remember dreaming about what life would be like living together, how we would have our own little home, invite people over to dinner, travel the world together and then one day, have kids together. I'm sure many of you remember a time like that in your life, where you were planning and dreaming about the future—a happy time, when all seemed like it was well.

But for Joseph, all that was about to change. In one moment his life was to be forever altered. We don't know how he found out, but he did find out. Mary, this pure, young woman, whom Joseph loved and was dreaming of their future together, had just got back from a three month trip to see her cousin Elizabeth, and she was pregnant. And Joseph knew it wasn't his. How would you feel if you were Joseph? Or perhaps a better question is how did you feel when you experienced something similar? Kids, hands up how many of you have ever been picked last in gym class or playing games with your friends? How did that make you feel? I wonder if Joseph felt the same? Like he'd been picked last.

We've all had that phone call, or that conversation where all of a sudden our world changed. Our plans and hope for the future dashed in a moment. My friend Joe tells me of sitting in the doctor's office with his wife over twelve years ago as the doctor explained to them that their firstborn child was going to have Down syndrome and that they needed to decide, “What they wanted to do.” Their hopes and dreams of a healthy child gone in a moment. I remember a Friday morning in February this year, sitting at my desk at home receiving a phone call from my mom. I could hear the fear in her voice as she said, “Ellis, your dad had a heart attack and died.” My hopes and dreams of a future with my dad in it were dashed.

Shocked. Disappointed. Angry. Sad. We've all been where Joseph was in one way or another. We've all felt that pain. We've all turned around to God and gone, “Why? Why, God did you allow this to happen? I thought you were working this all together in the perfect way. But now... I don't even know if you're working in this at all.”

Joseph took some time to think about what he wanted to do. The woman he loved appeared to have betrayed him. And this is what the story says he decided to do:

“And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:19) He had every right to divorce her, to cast her aside. And in that culture, she would have been stoned as an adulteress. But Joseph, who was a just man, didn’t want Mary to be put to shame. He still wanted to protect her. So he resolved to make every effort he could to keep the whole thing quiet, to let Mary raise the child, to make sure she wasn’t stoned.

So often, the way we respond to the things life throws at us is to make our own plan about how to respond. Like the doctor said to my friend Joe and his wife about their child who tested positive for Down syndrome: “You should take some time to decide what you want to do.” They could have chosen an abortion, passed it off as a miscarriage, or tried for another child. I mean, raising a child with Down syndrome is hard.

We jump in when life deals us a crummy hand and try to fix it ourselves. We tell ourselves that there is no good choice here—if I keep the child, it won’t be good for him or her. If I don’t keep the child, it won’t be good for him or her either. Perhaps Joseph thought the same thing. If I marry Mary it won’t be good for us; I’ll always resent it. If I divorce her quietly, she’ll be alone, but she won’t have to put up with my resentment.

But then Joseph’s story takes a turn. Listen to what happens next:

“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”” (Matthew 1:20–21)

Kids, hand ups, how many of you have had a weird dream? My three-year-old daughter Evelyn told me about a dream she once had. She dreamed that she was in Mickey Mouse’s Clubhouse with Mickey and the gang. Pretty cool, huh? In fact, she was genuinely sad when she woke up and it wasn’t real. But we all know dreams aren’t real, right? We don’t all wake up from dreams and believe they were real, do we? Dreams can be written off as just that: dreams. Especially when they contain something crazy like what Joseph’s dream claimed.

In Joseph’s dream, he saw an angel who claimed that Mary could be pregnant and still be a virgin, and that she would bear a son who would save people from their sins. Of all the dreams you could possibly have, this was pretty out there. Joseph could have easily written it off, but he didn’t. Why?

Kids, hands up, how many of you have ever prayed? All this year we’ve been talking about prayer at Chapel Hill. We’ve looked at the Lord’s Prayer: Our Father. We’ve talked about prayers of the book of Psalms. And we’re going to look how to pray for others this winter. But Joseph here shows us a type of prayer that we often ignore: Listening. You see it would have been easy for Joseph to ignore this dream

as just that, a dream. But I believe it was more than that to Joseph. I believe that when the story says, "as he considered these things," that means that Joseph was honestly seeking answers to his doubts. That he was listening for God.

My friend Joe and his wife, after they found out the positive test result for Down syndrome on a Friday had to wait until the Monday for a scan to have it all confirmed. That weekend, Joe said, was one of the longest of his life. They were distraught. Their hopes and dreams felt crushed. But that weekend they turned to prayer and listened to God. And as they prayed, they felt God led them to the story of David. A young shepherd boy who was not afraid of a giant named Goliath. And David wasn't afraid of this giant because he thought he could defeat him, but because he believed that his God was bigger and stronger and more powerful than this giant. In the same way, Joe and his wife felt that God was saying to them: "I am bigger and more powerful than Down syndrome. Trust me and raise this child."

You see, when something bad happens in our life, our instinct is to make a plan to try and solve it. But God so desperately wants us instead to turn to him, and listen to what he says. To stop making our plans, and to seek his plan. To trust that he is still at work and nothing can stop his plans or his purposes from coming to fruition. To listen for his voice.

That's what Joseph ended up doing. He listened to God. He trusted him, and he obeyed him. Our story ends like this: "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:24–25)

In many ways, Joseph didn't have a starring role in the birth of Jesus. But because he listened to God and trusted him, he got to play an incredible role in the life of Jesus. Joseph got to give Jesus his name, something of great honor, even today. Rachel and I spent hours trying to find the right names for our two little ones. Joseph got to protect his family when Herod sought to kill Jesus. He took them to Egypt to keep them alive. And as Jesus was growing up, Joseph got to teach him his trade: carpentry. He got to teach the creator of the world how to create from the things of this world.

My own friend Joe and his wife listened to God too. They made the decision that no matter what it took, they were going to raise this child. And so they went back on the Monday to have a scan. As the ultrasound technician was taking measurements, he kept flicking back and forth at the pieces of paper in front of him. He had this puzzled look on his face. Eventually he called the doctor in; they both agreed. The technician turned to Joe and his wife and he said: "I've got some great news. Your son does not have Down syndrome. Someone inputted the wrong due date into our system and we thought he wasn't developing correctly. He is perfectly healthy. Oh, and by the way, it's a boy!"

God is writing a story in this world that is bigger than we can see with our eyes. From Joseph's perspective, and from my friend Joe's perspective, things looked bleak. It looked like God had forgotten them. That their hopes and dreams, that they maybe even felt God had given them, were crushed. Maybe you too feel like that about something in your life? A missed opportunity. A broken relationship. A person who was there last Christmas but won't be there this Christmas, like my dad. But the truth is that God is writing a story bigger than we can see. And our crushed hopes and disappointments will not stand in the way of his purposes.

Because Joseph listened to God and took Mary as his wife, he got the privilege of being a part of God's story. He could have written his own version of the story, played out his plan, and been missing entirely from the story of the Savior of this world. But instead he swallowed his pride, married a woman who everyone believed was an adulteress, raised a son not his own, and played a role in the salvation of God's people. God's plans are bigger than our disappointments. Listen to him. Trust him. And play the part that he is asking you to play in his story. Even if it hurts. Because his story is so much better than ours.

[O Holy Night - song.]

One day, Joseph's son Jesus grew up to follow in his Father's footsteps. Just as Joseph took the pain of his situation upon himself, Jesus took the pain of this world upon himself. Just as Joseph was willing to commit himself to someone who seemed unfaithful, Jesus was willing to commit himself to people who were actually unfaithful. Just as Joseph saved Mary's life, Jesus has saved our lives.

We have all cheated on God and chosen our own plan instead of his. But Jesus took the consequences of that upon himself on the cross, and instead gave us the life that he alone deserved, through his Spirit. Tonight, if you don't yet know the life that Jesus is offering to you, I want to give you the opportunity to receive it. The way we do that is by praying a simple prayer. Sorry. Thank You. Please. Sorry Father, that I have chosen my own plans instead of yours. Thank you Jesus, that you have paid the price of my mistakes. Please Spirit, come and live in me and help me choose God's plans and not my own.

So I'd love us all to close our eyes and bow our heads. If that's you today, and you want to pray that prayer, I want to ask you to look up at me right now, as an outward display of that inward commitment. And now I want to pray and ask that you pray these words in your heart.

[Pray] *Sorry Father, that I have chosen my own plans instead of yours. Thank you Jesus, that you have paid the price of my mistakes. Please Spirit, come and live in me and help me choose God's plans and not my own.*