

Silent Night

On Sunday, we resumed our sermon series called “If we knew now what they knew then. . . . 7 Steps to spiritual power.” We looked to the example of Mary and Joseph for Lesson/Step 4.

1. Before we discuss the sermon, first a warm up question: What are you most looking forward to this Christmas season?
2. Jeff began Sunday’s sermon by reminding us of the basic pattern of life laid down for us by the mother and father of our faith, Abraham and Sarah. God called them to leave their hometown of Ur in search for a promised land yet to be revealed to them, so they could create a new nation there that would bless the earth. Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith [they] obeyed when [they were] called to set out for a place that [they] were to receive for an inheritance. And [they] set out, not knowing where they were going.” By their example, Abraham and Sarah remind us that life is a journey with many surprising twists and turns that must be embraced by faith.
 - a. Some of us are spontaneous people who love surprises; others of us are destination-oriented people who want to know exactly where we’re going before we set out. Which kind of person are you? Tell us a story from your life that illustrates how much you love (or hate) to be surprised.
 - b. Suppose you, like Abraham and Sarah, started to get a really strong sense that God was calling you to pull up stakes and move to a completely new place to start a whole new way of life. Do you think you would do it? Why or why not?
3. Oddly enough, the story of Abraham and Sarah doesn’t reach its ultimate fulfillment until thousands of years later in the life of Mary and Joseph and the child they would bring into the world. In order for that to happen, Mary and Joseph, like Abraham and Sarah, had to be prepared to embrace an unexpected calling that would turn their lives upside down. First let’s look at Mary. Read Luke 1:26-38.
 - a. Suppose you were the angel responsible for delivering this message to Mary. How would you have felt?
 - b. Mary was probably still a teenager. She was engaged to Joseph, about to be married, and probably dreaming of living a wonderful, conventional life in her hometown of Nazareth. If she accepted the angel’s message, she would put herself in the position of having to tell her parents, her fiancé, and the entire village of Nazareth that though unmarried, she was carrying a miracle child. If you had been Mary, how do you think you would have responded to the angel’s message?
 - c. By the time we get to verse 38, where Mary accepts her call, at that point what do you think she was feeling?

4. Now let's take a look at the story from Joseph's perspective. Read Matthew 1:18-25.
- What does verse 19 tell us about Joseph's state of mind and how he had reacted to what Mary had told him.
 - If you had been Joseph, and you experienced the dream described in verses 20-23, how do you think you would have responded?
 - What do you think gave Joseph the ability to embrace the message of his dream?
5. The amazing thing about Mary and Joseph is that each was thrust into a shocking position that could have easily evoked a reaction of frustration, anger, and fear. All their plans were being disrupted and they were being asked to do something really wonderful, but very difficult, even dangerous. Jeff said, "I don't know about you, but I would probably have been so caught up in my frustration and anger and fear, I doubt I would have been able to hear God saying anything. But Mary and Joseph were able to calm themselves and listen to what God had to say about this shocking turn of events." From this we drew our key lesson from Mary and Joseph – the 4th key lesson in our sermon series, namely: **When life surprises you, shut up and listen. Be still. Don't go off; instead go deep inside to a place of prayerful contemplation.**

- Re-read verses 28-31. Jeff suggested that Mary and Joseph were able to respond with listening calm because they were able to believe what the angel said: (a) God loves me, i.e., God's favor is on my life; and therefore, (b) God is with me in everything. From that Jeff drew a spiritual formula:

Faith in God's love for me + God's presence with me in everything =
A predisposition to listen, instead of freaking out, when life surprises me.

- Do you believe God's favor is upon you?
 - Do you believe God is with you in everything?
- What's the biggest surprise God has served up in your life's journey over the past ten years? How did you respond? Do you believe God is at work in that surprising turn of events? If so, how?
 - Ruth Haley Barton describes a listening spirit this way: "Discernment involves listening with love and attention to our experiences, to each other, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true."

In what experience in your life right now do you feel called to practice that kind of deep spiritual listening? Are you hearing anything yet?