12-29-19 Altogether Trust Rev. Amy Haines

Matt 2:13-23 Christmas 1

One of my favorite moments in worship happened Tuesday night. I love looking out over our congregation on Christmas Eve as the light of Christ is passed person to person, row by row,

then together we sing *Silent Night*. As we sing the final verse, as we once more sing “Christ the Savior is Born,” some will raise their candles high. And I wonder—what does that raised candle mean, to each person present that night?

Is it simply tradition? Or is it a sign of faith? Is it a symbol of thanks for Christ’s presence with us? Or is it a declaration that Christ is greater than the struggles of this past year? Is it a sign of hope for the year ahead?

One candle does not emit much light. Yet in a darkened room, even one candle is a ray of hope,

promising brighter days ahead. A room full of candles remind us that we are not alone. Together we are the body of Christ. And no matter what we face, God is with us.

Jesus’ birth long ago was much like that one candle shining in the darkness. The residents of Bethlehem didn’t think much of a baby’s birth to the visitors in town for the census. After all, babies are born every day.

Yet God took notice. And the shepherds who were visited by angels took notice. And the magi who saw a new star appear in the sky took notice. And even King Herod took notice.

For this baby’s birth would change the world. Person by person. Place by place. Generation by generation.

Jesus doesn’t change our world by eliminating our struggles. Jesus doesn’t change the world by suddenly smoothing out the rough roads of life. Jesus doesn’t change the world by miraculously getting rid of all evil.

Rather, Jesus comes to be with us in the midst of our struggles, our sorrows, our journeys, and the evil of our world. Jesus offers us God’s hope and love, peace and joy in the midst of our daily lives. Then we are changed day by day, step by faithful step. Then our world is changed one person, one story, one moment at a time.

The Gospel of Matthew vividly reminds us that Jesus is God’s gift of love in the midst of all of life. The good and the ugly. The joy and the sorrow. The Gospel of Matthew vividly reminds us

that God sent Jesus not simply to love the world, but also to save the world.

We may not like today’s passage. It is jarring this close to Christmas. Today we would rather stay in our holiday mode of happiness than deal with the raw reality of this world. We want to keep singing hymns about the baby in the manger. Not think about the sacrifices Jesus made for us in life. We want to relax and enjoy our time off, or time with family, or time away from the normal stress of everyday life. We don’t want to think about the ways our trust in God may call us out of our comfort zones.

Yet Matthew calls us back to life beyond the manger. Then reminds us that no matter what we face in life, God is with us! Are we ready to trust this promise, and God’s presence?

Joseph had to learn to trust God in all of life’s circumstances. Last Sunday, on our fourth Sunday of Advent, we heard the beginning of Joseph’s journey. Joseph was a righteous Jew with his life all planned out. He had built up a business as a woodworker. He was known to be faithful to his God. And he was betrothed to Mary, looking forward to starting a family with her.

Until her unexpected news of a pregnancy, and her audacity to claim the baby was the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God. Joseph didn’t know what to think! At first, he didn’t believe her. Being a faithful Jew, he sought to quietly divorce her, for her could not bring himself to stone her for adultery, which was what the Law required.

Yet God intervened, through the words of an angel in a dream. Joseph, do not be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. Raise Jesus as your own Son. Her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and is the Son of God.

Joseph trusted the word of the angel as the word of God. He took Mary as his wife, and began to plan for their life together.

Then life took another unexpected detour, when Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem for the census. He took a very pregnant Mary with her, and trusted God’s providence when she gave birth in a strange town, in a strange location.

Joseph was reminded by God that this child was no ordinary child when shepherds arrived to worship Jesus, with news of angelic messengers. Joseph was reminded by God that this child was no ordinary child when magi from the east, foreigners and non-believers, arrived to worship Jesus, with news of a star announcing Jesus’ birth. Do you think by the second set of visitors Joseph finally trusted the truth of the angel’s words—that his son was Emmanuel, God with us?

Today, the Gospel of Matthew continues Joseph’s story of trust.

While Joseph may have been ready to settle down as a woodworker in Bethlehem, life took another unexpected detour.

Once the magi left to go home by another way, Joseph was warned by God in another dream to flee the wrath of King Herod. The angel warned: “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.”

King Herod was a Jew who ruled the territory of Judea for 33 years, under the authority of Caesar and the Roman Empire. Yet even Rome was known to question Herod’s sanity, as he was a ruthless, paranoid ruler who violently snuffed out anyone who threatened his power. This included a wife and her sons. This included any insurgents who questioned Roman rule.

This also included any babies who dared to be called “King of the Jews.” That was Herod’s title!

How dare someone else be called King?

There is a reason Herod’s part of the Christmas story is rarely mentioned at Christmas. I’ve only ever preached on this story once in 20 years of ministry!

Herod jars our sentimental Christmas with his ruthlessness. Herod turns the story of Christmas from PG to R for violence. He is the epitome of the powers and principalities that want to squash anything good and loving and hopeful and of God in our world. Herod had gotten word of Jesus’ arrival from the unsuspecting magi, and did not want anyone, even a youngling, to challenge his rule.

For those of you who are *Star Wars* fans, Herod’s wrath reminds me of *Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith*. Once Anakin Skywalker proclaimed his loyalty to Darth Sideous, the Sith lord sought to rid the world of the Jedi, the good guys who stood in his way. Anakin, now named Darth Vader, was sent to the Jedi Temple to kill all the younglings, the children of the Jedi.

Once King Herod got word of a potential baby born as King of the Jews, which was his title,

he ordered the killing of all children age two and under in and around Bethlehem.

Not exactly the warm fuzzy story we want to ponder at Christmas, when all we want to focus on is peace and goodwill and gift giving.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the cries of those parents echoed the cries of Rachel long ago, and are still heard today in the cries of parents after every school shooting or every random act of violence or every tragedy that takes innocent lives.

I can still remember that the day I brought my Rachel home from the hospital was the day of the Sandy Hook school shooting. I celebrated a new birth as other parents mourned a senseless shooting.

Joseph trusted that God was with him when he heeded the warning of the angel to take his wife and child and flee in the middle of the night to the safety of Egypt, if being a refugee can ever be considered a safe option.

How often does this same scenario play out around our world still today? How many other families, from Syria and Central America and northern Africa, flee for their lives from

ruthless dictators, gang violence, and lack of hope? How many Christians around our world are fleeing persecution, longing for a place to worship Jesus in safety and not fear?

Joseph’s story is not simply a long-ago tale. It is a journey of love, hope and faith that still happens often in our world today.

Joseph trusted that God was with them. In Bethlehem. In Egypt. And later, in Galilee, after another angel called the family back home.

Joseph had to live by altogether trust. He stepped out in faith, even in the middle of the night,

not knowing where the next step of his journey would taken him, yet trusting God to guide him.

How often do we live by an almost trust, yearning to follow where God leads, saying we will go where God leads, then striving to do life our own way, on our own terms, rather than the way God directs? God does not call us to an almost trust but an altogether trust.

Corrie Ten Boom, a concentration camp survivor after hiding Jews from Nazi Germany,

once declared: “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

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This past year may have been a year of joy and celebration for you. Or this past year may have been a year of sorrow and struggle. What unexpected detours did you face? What unexpected blessings did you receive?

Our world has seen tragedy this past year. Innocent lives are still be taken in shootings at schools and Walmart, on military bases and in Dayton. Families are still dealing with the aftermath of tornadoes, hurricanes and wildfires. Children still remain in detention centers at the border. Refugees are still being turned away.

Yet our world has also seen signs of hope and community. After Joe Burrow’s Heisman speech,

over $640,000 has been raised for the Athens County Ohio Food Pantry. The greater Dayton community has come together time and again this year to assist their neighbors. You are offering hope right now to families who are yearning for a better life through Interfaith Hospitality Network. What a reminder of the good news of Jesus in the midst of a struggling world when we show up on Christmas Eve with reminders on the doors to be mindful of our guests.

We do not know what we will face in the new year. What joys or struggles. What dreams realized or dreams shattered. We do not know what will happen with our denomination

or what will happen with the presidential election. We do not know what tomorrow will bring.

Yet we can listen to the words of the angels in the Christmas story:

Do not be afraid.

We can trust God’s promises throughout Scripture. God claims us. God loves us. God forgives us. God offers us new life.

While we cannot take away the sorrows and struggles of this world, we can still offer a word of hope, a hand of grace, a response of love in the midst of whatever we face.

As Toby Mckeehan once said, “Faith isn’t a feeling; it’s a choice to trust God even when the road ahead seems uncertain.”

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As we end one year and begin another, leave behind your fear and doubt. Give thanks that God is with us, no matter what we face. Welcome Jesus into your hearts and lives, and choose to follow him, wherever he may lead us. Then be a light in the darkness, the light of Christ, proclaiming faith and trust, hope and peace, love and joy.

God guide us to altogether trust in the new year.

Let us pray.