

2 Christmas

January 4, 2015

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Jeremiah 31:7-14

During Babylon exile-Israel is redeemed by God's love, not their efforts.

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

God has blessed us to be holy and blameless before him, destined for adoption.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Joseph follows 'dreams', Herod kills innocents. God protects Jesus.

I wonder if God chose Mary and Joseph for their very special responsibility because He knew that they had enough faith to hear the messages that would be sent, and they would be bold enough to act on what they received.

An angel was sent to Mary to announce God's plan, and to go back to God with her consent to be one of the main players in the plan. Joseph was guided by an angel to listen to Mary and believe her, and to raise Jesus as his own child. He was guided again to escape to Egypt before the ruthless King Herod could harm Jesus; and again, when Herod had died, Joseph was guided to return to Israel; and again, to not return to Bethlehem, but to the safety of the small village of Nazareth.

Mary and Joseph kept their faith and trust in God – not only through her pregnancy, and their travel to Bethlehem, her giving birth in a stable, and receiving visits by shepherds and wise men from the East. They also kept centered in their faith in God through the attempts by King Herod to find and kill Jesus. They were radically open to God, and willing to be led by the Spirit, in order to be effectively used by God. Most of these amazing reports of divine encounters in the nativity story could have been rejected as strange dreams, or hallucinations, or indigestion from a bad dinner before going to sleep. But they had a keen awareness of God, and they were ready to hear and to act. Mary and Joseph held a 'faith treasure' within them; and each of us has a 'faith treasure' within us, which is available to guide us to be effectively used by God.

I have been drawn to this idea of a 'faith treasure' living within each of us; something to study, to make stronger, to share, and to use. That idea reminded me of a sermon series that we did just a little while ago: well, when I checked, it was almost ten years ago. In June and July of 2005 we spent six Sundays in a sermon series on Faith. Maybe it is time to do that series again, in an updated form. But I want to review just a few points today:

In Faith part 3: We learned that there are five steps we can take to grow our faith and trust in God. 1) Seize the moment. Whatever is YOUR next step to grow in faith, do it now. Don't wait until next month or next year. When God opens a door for you (maybe through a dream) walk through it.

2) Face your fears. Don't let them control you. Fear can paralyze your potential to be used by God. If God is for you, who can be against you?

3) Announce your faith to others. This is not about evangelizing door to door; but a secret faith is not faith. Share with other believers what you are asking God to do in your life.

4) Receive God's blessing. We all need a power greater than ourselves to make the changes that really make a difference in our lives. You and I need God's power in our life; and that involves having the faith to trust in and accept God's blessing.

5) Take the next step. For every one of us here, the Next Step is something different, because every one of us here is at a different stage of the journey that God wills for us. It might be to ask Jesus to take control of your life, or get baptized or confirmed, or take classes to learn more about the character of Jesus, or make the decision to pledge, or find a ministry to try, or share your faith with a friend at work.

The faith treasure that lived in Mary and Joseph was based on their upbringing as Jews, studying the character of God through Holy Scriptures, and listening to the teaching of the rabbis. But their faith was shown in the bold actions they took. Yours and my faith treasure is to be trusted in, acted upon, and lived by. Our faith in the incarnation of God the Son in the baby Jesus can change everything.

I encourage you to think and pray about the specific decisions you can make, and actions you can take, to build a deeper, stronger, bolder faith treasure within you. Amen.