

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Matthew 1:18-25 *Trust in the Hay*

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Hope, peace, joy, and love! These are the themes of Advent. We light the candles to remind us. We sing songs about these gifts the Christ child brings. These words appear on Christmas cards, throw pillows, ornaments, and I recently learned you can buy socks online with the words hope, peace, joy, and love printed on them. Oh, okay. Yes. I ordered a pair but they are on back order and won't arrive until January. Indeed, I am a huge fan of hope, peace, joy, and love—I couldn't make it through life without them. But it seems there may be one more candle we need—well, there's one candle I need at least—one more candle during this sacred season—the candle of trust.

These other gifts are, in many ways, dependent on trust. How can the promises of God fill us with HOPE if we don't trust that God will fulfill them? How can we know the PEACE that passes all understanding if we don't trust that God's peace will ultimately prevail on earth, and in our hearts? How can we experience true JOY—not temporary happiness—but the true joy that comes from knowing that, though this life can, indeed, be a wonderful life sometimes—true joy comes from knowing that this life with all of its ups and downs, heartbreaks and injustices is not all there is for us as spiritual beings on a human journey. How can we LOVE unconditionally if we don't trust that God loves us unconditionally, too?

Indeed, if we look at the Christmas story as it appears in scripture, we see that trust is at the core of what is happening—especially in the lives of Mary and Joseph. The examples of their extraordinary trust in God start with the visits they each receive from divine messengers . . .

Imagine the scene . . . the small nowhere village of Nazareth, I mean really, can anything good come of Nazareth? There's this young woman named Mary who was recently engaged to be married who suddenly receives a visit from an angel that will change her life . . .

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."-But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

There are other similar stories of people in scripture who are called to do extraordinary things, but those folks make excuses as they try to get God to let them off the hook. Moses-I'm a lousy public speaker, get my brother Aaron to do it. Jeremiah-Nope, I can't do it. I'm too young. Jonah-Are you even kidding me? Me, go to Ninevah—Nevah!

But Mary, though she was perplexed, Mary makes no excuses. She asks a clarifying question "How can this be, since I am a virgin?", receives an answer that most would find rather unsatisfactory "The Holy Spirit will come upon you", and she declares, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Talk about an example of "Here I am, Lord!" Mary's response to Gabriel is a remarkable example of what it looks like to truly trust the Lord even though in her case it means being socially ostracized, likely being

abandoned by her fiancé, and possibly even death under the Draconian cultural practices of the patriarchy of the day. But in spite of the dangers, Mary ponders instead of protests and accepts instead of trying to escape.

Though not placed in so dire a situation, Joseph also steps up in trust to God's calling in the passage Diane read for us this morning. An angel appears to him in a dream and tells him not to quietly divorce Mary as he had been planning and to instead follow through with marrying her. Joseph exhibited his deep faith in God by following the angel's instructions. Indeed, he was already ready to do the right thing—save Mary from public disgrace by dismissing her quietly instead of going all around the town telling about how she'd done him wrong—but after hearing from the angel in his dream Joseph does the even righter thing and follows Gabriel's directive—totally outlandish as it may have seemed.

Indeed, it could be argued that over the past 2000 years we have tamed this story and made it so much less outlandish than what it actually was. We have generalized and sanitized this story of Mary and Joseph to the extent that we miss just how faithful and trusting these two hardly even grown-ups were being. We hear the same stories year in and year out, perhaps without stopping to really consider what Mary and Joseph endured as a result of trusting in God's plan for their lives.

And who can blame us?

Who among us wants to picture a young woman's body convulsing with labor pains, her groans and cries echoed by the livestock whose natural response to the intruders in their space is to issue their auditory alarms?

Silent night? I'm not so sure.

Who among us wants to imagine what it must have been like for Mary there without her mother or her cousin Elizabeth or the village midwife to guide her through, though natural, one of the most physically traumatic and emotionally explosive experiences many women will have in a lifetime?

Mary did you know? Yes. She knew enough to know it was going to be hard and yet she did it anyway. That's what trust is.

Who among us wants to consider the blood and tears of childbirth mingling with heaven-only-knows what else was on the floor of that manger?

Away in a manger no crib for a bed, indeed. Just the cold, hard, stone or dirt floor so far away from the warmth of home back in Nazareth.

Who wants to imagine the anxiety and unknowing of a young man trying to make sense of the outrageous scene unfolding before him?

Joseph, dearest, Joseph mine, help me cradle the child Divine. This Joseph was certainly not your average Joe.

There in that manger, in the midst of the chaos and cries, surrounded by coarse straw and sweet hay, far from the home and people they loved, Mary and Joseph continued to trust. There was so much trust in the hay for the Holy Family! So much so that when they were called upon, once again, to place their trust in the Lord, they did so—even after all they had already been through.

Now after they 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." (Matthew 2:13-15)

I mean really. Egypt? They didn't know anyone in Egypt. Hadn't their ancestors escaped oppression in Egypt and endured forty years of hardship in the Exodus from Egypt and now they have to go back there—hunted and wanted by Herod at home and so now they have to become political refugees in a new land? And yet, they go. They trust the Lord to guide them, they entrust their lives to the Lord.

Oh, for the trust of Mary and Joseph. Oh, to trust in God even when it seems things are at their worst. Oh, to have the courage to trust so much that even though you've just walked through the valley of the shadow of death you turn around and go right back in knowing that God walks with you. Oh, to trust and obey.

And oh, to have a candle to light when the darkness makes it hard to trust . . . To have a candle to light when we wait for the diagnosis or test result . . . To have a candle to light when we feel abandoned and unloved by those we love the most . . . To have a candle to light when we don't know how we're going to pay the next bill . . . To have a candle to light when we don't know how to help our kids . . . To have a candle to light when depression threatens to steal our hope, peace, joy, or love . . . To have a candle to light in the shadows of grief and wondering . . . To have a candle to light when we are worried about what the future holds . . . To have a candle to light that reminds us that the Light of the World has come and is coming and continues to shine. To have a candle to light to remind us that no matter what, our God is a mighty God, trust-worthy and true and with God, all things are possible and so we can trust and obey.