

Embracing the Christ of Christmas
“Believe”
Matthew 1:18-25

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It's been said that even the deepest meaning of Christmas is chocked full of make-believe. God does the making and invites us to do the believing. That's what I would like to talk about today. Why not make this Christmas more than an adventure in fantasy? Why not, for you personally in your life, make this Christmas an affirmation of faith? For beyond the tinsel and beneath the hay and more important than all the cultural wrappings of Christmas, lies the truths that can shape and form our lives for today and for eternity. The word today is BELIEVE. I believe. Will you believe?

When Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, it's all about Mary. Mary is visited by the angel. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. Mary sings the "Magnificat." When Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, it's all about Joseph. Joseph struggles. Joseph dreams. Joseph obeys. Would there be a Christmas story today without the loyal, devout, compassionate Joseph doing his part? You can ponder that, but of this I am certain that Joseph found some deep beliefs that I need in my life to carry me through the days of my living.

I BELIEVE THAT GOD IS CLOSER THAN WE THINK.

“And they will call him Immanuel—which means God is with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Several years ago, artist Bette Midler recorded the song, “From a Distance.” In that song, Bette Midler declares that “God is watching us. God is watching us. God is watching us from a distance.” It's a beautiful song, but it is terrible theology. It is not what we believe as Christians. God is not out there watching us from a distance. The whole story of the Incarnation is that God is here and present and near at the heart of all we are and hope to be. God is not only omnipotent; God is omnipresent.

A.W. Tozer says that few other truths are taught in the scripture with as great clarity as the doctrine of the divine omnipresence of God. The passages are so plain it would take considerable effort to misunderstand them. When Adam and Eve fall, God comes to them. When the children of Israel escape, God guides them providing water from the rock, manna in the wilderness, and directions for the journey. The Psalmist says, *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”* Then, in one sweeping, grand miracle that could only be conceived in the mind of God, *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”* God is with us. You can build your life on that.

He came down to earth from heaven,
who is God and Lord of all.
And His shelter was a stable,
and His cradle was a stall.
With the poor, the scorned, the lonely
Lived on earth, our Savior holy.

In the significant moments of life we want significant people with us. In the critical moments of our life, we don't want to be alone. When our boys were born, mothers and babies were isolated behind glass doors and kept far from the anxious hands of their fathers, grandparents, siblings, and friends. Thank God things have changed. Now even pastors have the privilege of holding a new born asking the blessing of God upon them and making the sign of the Cross on the baby's head.

The great news of the Christian gospel is that God is with us. He is in our very midst, closer than the air we breathe, deeper than the desires of our hearts. When we walk through the valley of grief, dig through the despair of divorce, deal with the pains of prodigal children, suffer from the addictions that consume us, wrestle with the illnesses that threaten us, let us rest on this eternal, unending, everlasting truth—**WE ARE NOT ALONE. GOD IS WITH US.** I can think of no better statement of faith than that.

Prosperity preachers would have us believe that God is with us in our victories, our triumphs, our successes. God is, indeed, the source of all goodness. I don't doubt that. But I want you to hear today the other side. God is with us in our frailty, our faultiness, our dependence, our mortality. God is with us in our sickness as well as in health, when we are poorer than we would like to be and when it gets worse than we ever dreamed possible. God is with us.

A person feeling abandoned by God asked me this week how to practice the presence of God. First, I am not a mystic. I have more kinship with Tennyson who said, "There is more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." All of us have to struggle to find the truth, and I suspect that question is one that many of us ask from time to time.

How do we practice the presence of God? This is how I do it. You've got to find your own way. When I can't sleep, I don't count sheep. I quote scripture and thank God for the church and my parents who instilled those words in my soul when I was a little kid. I didn't think they were very important then, but God gives them to me as a beautiful gift in the night now. When I grow anxious, I don't panic. I remember that God's grace has been sufficient for my every need. It's always been that way. The grace of God is sufficient for every need. I believe that with all my heart. When I need comfort, I wrap myself in a prayer shawl or prayer blanket that you gave me and I sing an old song about "The Comforter has come. The Comforter has come, the Holy Ghost from heaven, the Father's only Son."

Brother Lawrence, the mystic who knew how to practice the presence of God, once said, “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God, those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.” I believe that God is closer than we often think.

I BELIEVE THAT PROBLEMS ARE LACED WITH POSSIBILITIES.

The Law said, “Stone her.” Love said, “Protect her.” Between this rock and a hard place, Joseph needed a better idea. Verse 20 “*After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.*” Aren’t you grateful for those moments when it is not either/or, this or that, but new possibilities begin to come on the scene. It’s the most fantastic moment of life, when new avenues begin to appear. The law was clear. Mary was pregnant and by law deserved to be stoned. Joseph loved her; he wanted to put her away privately. That’s the logic of this story. But this is not about logic. It is about a higher understanding and plane of life.

There are times and places in life when we need to think outside the box. I know, boxes are helpful. I am not against the box. Did you see the cartoon featuring a business executive holding his cat over the kitty litter box saying sternly, “Never, ever, think outside the box.” Charles H. Duell, director of the U.S. Patent Office said in 1899, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.”

When it comes to the routines of our days, the dailiness of many decisions, I’m all for thinking inside the box. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel every time we want to go to the store. I like routines. There is security in the status quo. The older I get, the more I like things to be same.

However, unusual situations call for creative thinking. Sometimes we are faced with things in life where the box is too small, where it won’t work anymore. This is where we find Joseph in the story. He can stay in the box, follow the law, be a good Jew. He can be a loving, caring person reaching out to his betrothed wife. But he finds something else. The Lord appears in a dream. Thinking outside the box means thinking beyond the parameters of human consciousness and experience, to see beyond the norm, to be visionary, to activate our spiritual resources. We exist inside the box, but we are in touch with the Creator of the universe who made the box. With God, all things are possible.

Joseph refused to be boxed in with conventional ways of dealing with problems. This carpenter, who made his living cutting boards, knew it is easier to cut a board down to size than to stretch a board that has already been cut too short. Some of us have rolled out our faith too flat. We need to open the door to new possibilities to God’s working in our lives. Joseph knew that every problem is laced with a possibility.

Will Rogers wanted to become a circus cowboy. He finally got an opportunity to perform on stage in New York City. But Will got so nervous in front of that big

audience that he got tangled up in his own rope. Everybody started laughing. Instead of panicking, Will commented, “Well, getting tangled up in a rope ain’t so bad, unless it’s around your neck.” Everybody laughed again. Then he made another comment, and they laughed some more. Suddenly a new career for Will Rogers was born.

What problems are you facing that call for possibility thinking? Where do you need a new dream to face some hard realities? I try to give this church the best leadership I can possibly provide. In the ebb and flow of time, we are constantly trying to solve problems, face facts, and do the will of God. I don’t have the last word on the direction of this congregation. Our future is in God’s hands. At the table of grace, we will find ways to be in ministry together that none of us can even dream today. So I am not going to close it off too much. I’m just going to live on the tiptoes of God’s potential in our midst.

We worship in a world torn by war, divided by ideology, stricken with poverty, possessed by greed and power. Sometimes I get down on my knees and say, ‘Can’t the good people of this world, whatever their faith, find a better way? Can’t we together find a better way?’ It’s time for some creative thinking. It’s time to quit choosing up sides and yelling at one another. It’s time to find a higher road. It’s time for conscientious people to begin thinking outside the box.

I live my life by a simple motto: “It’s not what happens to you but what you do with what happens to you that makes the difference.” I may have cancer, but cancer will never have me. I may be down, but I will never be out. When we are weak, we learn in whom our strength really lies. *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Corinthians 2:9). *For our light affliction that works against us for the moment is nothing compared to the glory that shall yet be revealed to us through Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 8:18).

I BELIEVE THAT OBEDIENCE IS BETTER THAN UNDERSTANDING.

“And Joseph woke up; he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him to do” (v. 24). Did he understand it all? I doubt it. Do you have to understand to be faithful and obedient? You really don’t.

In the movie Pearl Harbor, two cocky pilots by the name of Ralph and Danny are called into Col. Jimmy Doolittle’s office. The commanding officer asks the two pilots “Do you guys know what a top secret is?” Without hesitation Ralph replies, “Yes Sir, it’s the kind of mission where you get the medals but they send them to your relatives because you get killed.” Before that conversation was over Ralph and Danny found themselves engaged in a top secret mission, one they could not explain or understand, but on which hung the future of the free world. Sometime I wonder, do I trust my God that much? I know, we spend a lot of time in life asking, “Why?” But what is important is not, “Why?” The question is “Who?” Oswald Chambers said, “Never try to explain God until you have obeyed God.”

Who wants to be Joseph in the Christmas play? No one does. He has no lines to say or songs to sing. He just stands there. He takes Mary home as his wife, but has no union with her. He takes cold showers to cool his desire and if he doubts, it's sealed between God and him in the privacy of that carpenter shop.

Let me tell you what being obedient did. It gave Jesus a home to lay his head. It gave Jesus a name that linked him to King David. It gave Jesus a father whom he compared to God. It gave Jesus a job that illumined his stories. The saints of history are not those who have it all worked out. The saints of history are those who live in the constant assurance that they will understand it better by and by.

On these three principles I stake my life:
I believe that God is closer than we think.
I believe that problems are laced with possibilities.
I believe it's better to obey than to understand.

I believe. Lord, help us when it is hard to believe.