

**All is Calm: 2. Serenity to Accept**  
**Luke 1:28-33**  
**December 8, 2019**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Maybe it's because I had my fill of snow removal in the previous week, but last week I found myself thinking about our many family vacations to the beach – the ocean beach. Each day of our family vacations, we would spend a few hours at the beach, and one of our favorite things to do was to take our boogie boards out into the ocean surf and ride a wave. It was great fun, and they remain wonderful memories, but every once in a while there would be a wave – a wave that we were not expecting or an especially strong undertow that would push us under the water and send us in a direction we were not prepared to go. And we would come to the surface with a mouthful of water, surprised by what we had just experienced. And it's that experience which came to mind as I thought about our theme for today.

If you live long enough, the unexpected will happen. You lose your job, you get depressed, your parents go through divorce or you do, or your doctor says it's cancer, or your girlfriend says she doesn't love you, or a child says "get out of my life." You find yourself worrying about the money you don't have. We'd all like to live in a place where the unexpected never comes – where that wave or the undertow doesn't knock us off our feet, but there's no place like that. We are not in charge of everything! There's an episode from an old Seinfeld show where George Costanza's father thinks he has found the answer to life's unexpected interruptions. [scene from Seinfeld] "Serenity now!"

Jesus once said: **"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives."** (John 14:27) The peace the world gives is a good mood. It's like the email I received on cyber Monday from Hilton vacations. The email said: Don't miss out, get the VIP treatment. And there was photos of exotic place around the world – blue sky, beautiful beaches, and all the people were smiling. It got my attention, because I want that! Instead, my life is more like what I experienced on Friday. I was in a hurry to get to Minneapolis so I checked the app on my phone and I could save one minute by taking highway 55, but I don't think the app knew that I would hit every red light and by the fourth red light – "serenity now!" What we need is more than a good mood or a feel-good moment. We need serenity. Serenity is not dependent on pleasant circumstances. It is a byproduct of finding a solid spiritual foundation. And it's what Jesus offers.

As you entered this morning, I hope you received a copy of the Serenity Prayer. If you are watching online, scroll down and click on the prayer and a copy will appear. The prayer was written by the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930. The first part of the prayer was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and is still used by 12-step program, but I wanted you to have the full prayer. The prayer is meant to help us when life happens and it's not what we can control. Let's read it together: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Taking one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, the sinful world as it is and not as I would have it, trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with him forever in the next. Amen.*

In this Advent season, I'm inviting us to pray this prayer every morning and every night. I don't want the "Serenity now!" What I want is the serenity to accept what I cannot change. And that brings us to Luke's story about Mary who be the mother of Jesus.

One day, God sent an angel named Gabriel to a tiny village in the middle of nowhere named Nazareth with a message for a young teenaged woman named Mary. **“Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever.”** Her response is not a “yes,” a “woohoo,” I just won the lottery. I get to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. From now on people will call me blessed and one day they will name last second football passes after me! Luke tells us her immediate response is just the opposite. **She was confused by these words... afraid...** Who wouldn’t be? I don’t know about the nature of sex education in the first century but I don’t think Immaculate Conception is cover in any of the classes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Did any of your parents mention this possibility? People in the first century didn’t know about X and Y chromosomes, but they knew how pregnancy happened – and it took one man and one woman and any other story was covering up a moral and social offense. Here’s reality of the news Mary has just received – she’s young, engaged to be married, and now pregnant, and since Joseph is not the father that made Mary guilty of adultery. According to the Torah, adultery was punishable by stoning, and even if Joseph did not press charges, the law stated that he could not marry her. She would be left destitute – ostracized by her family and her community and if she found a way to survive, she and her son would be excluded from the synagogue and temple. She has just been hit by an enormous wave and the undertow leaves her gasping for air. “How can this be?” she asks. Serenity now! And yet, a few verses later – faced with God’s call to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of the joy and pain this will involve, she says the words which resound through history as a model of serenity in response to the unexpected: **“I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”** God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

Luke tells us that 8 days after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph take their baby to the Temple, and an old man named Simeon holds the baby in his arms and praises God for this child. And then he turns to Mary and says: **“A sword will pierce your innermost being (heart)”** And she must have wondered what he meant. God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

Already Mary and Joseph were facing financial hardship. In Israel, when a child was born, the parents were to bring an offering to the Temple and according to scripture, that offering was to be a lamb, but the law also made an exception **If the mother cannot afford a sheep, she can bring two turtledoves or two pigeons.** Mary could not afford a lamb. How does it feel if you have a newborn child, and you cannot afford for your child what everyone can? Imagine the line at the Temple, seeing all the families that are there for the blessing of their child and they’ve brought the standard offering – a lamb – but not Mary and Joseph. All they can afford are 2 pigeons. God, grant me the serenity to accept what we cannot afford.

Mary would have to accept her inability to control her son. When Jesus turned 12, his parents took him to the Temple in Jerusalem, and they lost him for three days. Is there anything worse than losing your child. I remember when that happened in a store – but to go three days without knowing where Jesus was. **When his parents saw him, they were shocked. His mother said, “Child, why have you treated us like this?”** What do I do when I can’t protect my child or prevent my child from getting hurt? And Jesus didn’t even apologize. All he says, “I must be about my father’s house.” God, grant me the serenity to accept.. Luke tells us: [slide] **Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart.** These are also what Mary was doing at the manger. Serenity means making room in your heart, being fully present to God. Accepting means instead of regretting a past I

cannot fix or worrying about a future I cannot control, I am living into this moment with God's presence and blessing.

Mary would learn to accept rejection. As Jesus began his ministry, he was spending time with people who were considered outcast and sinners and it reached a point where Mary and his brothers and sisters showed up to take him home. They thought he was delusional. And when Jesus is told that his Mary has arrived, he says "**Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?**" In other words, my true family are the people around me who accept what I'm doing. If I was speaking somewhere and my mother came in looking for me, and I were to say "who is my mother?" I know she would have something to say: I'm your mother, and you are my son. I brought you into this world. Now show some respect!" For Mary: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

And at the end of Jesus' life, John's gospel tells us: **Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross.** How excruciatingly painful that must have been. This man who was a child that she carried inside – beaten, nailed to a cross, and left to die. And she, powerless to prevent this. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

If you live long enough – and if you love, a sword will pierce your heart. Some person you would give everything in the world to help and you can't help that person. We who follow Jesus do not say, we will choose an attitude of serenity because that's better way to live. We pray: O God, O God, grant me the serenity to accept... When that wave comes and the undertow knocks you off your feet – you lose your job or your money or your health or your relationship – God, grant me the serenity to accept – because the worst thing is never the last thing.

Back in the 1800s, there was a man named Horatio Spafford. He was a committed Christian who faced one wave, one unexpected event after another. His four year old son died in 1871, and then later than year, he lost everything in the great Chicago fire. He worked hard to regain it and planned a trip with his family to Europe – a mission trip where they would participate in preaching revivals of the evangelist Dwight Moody. But then he was delayed by business so he sent his family ahead, planning to join them as soon as he. As their ship crossed the Atlantic, it was hit by another ship killing all four of his daughters. Only his wife survived. When she was able to send a message to her husband, it contained two words: saved alone. He got on the next ship to join her, and as that ship reached the spot where his four daughters drowned, he wrote these words: *When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*

If you are in a place this morning where you need serenity, I want to pray for you. Maybe you have financial problems you cannot change or you have job problems or no job at all. Maybe things are not going well at school or you'd love to have a child but you can't. Or maybe an addiction has a grip on your life or the life of someone you love. Hear this prayer:

God, grant to every person here and to those who are listening online – Grant them the serenity to accept that things they cannot change. Give them peace that is greater than the circumstances that they face. Give them the hope that is greater than death. We pray in the name of the one who came to live among us as Wonderful Counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Amen.

## Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 8, 2019

**Weekly Prayer:** “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, you have taught me to say: ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’” Lord Jesus, build our faith that we might be able to say in every circumstance, “It is well with my soul.” Amen.

### Monday, December 9

#### **Scripture: Luke 1:26-38**

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man?” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.” Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

**Observation:** Today we read the passage where Mary, the mother of Jesus, enters the Bible story— probably, given what we know of her culture, a girl in her mid-teens, who learns that God has chosen her for a literally earth-shaking life mission. Luke tells us that she was confused by what she heard (who wouldn’t be!) and afraid. The ramifications of an unexpected pregnancy before marriage were potentially life-threatening. She was suddenly in the midst of a great storm – and not as a result of anything she had done.

**Application:** Gabriel unfolded a reality and a task to Mary which she couldn’t, and we can’t, fully understand. How does her response in verse 38 (“I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”) speak to your heart? Are you willing to surrender your life to God’s leading, even in areas that call for a trust that reaches beyond intellectual understanding?

**Prayer:** God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Remind me that you are with me in all that I face. Help me to be alongside others who find themselves in the middle of circumstances beyond their control. Amen.

### Tuesday, December 10

#### **Scripture: Luke 1:46-55**

Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to

the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

**Observation:** In the angel's announcement to Mary that she would have a son, Mary also learns that her relative (some suggest cousin, others say her aunt) Elizabeth was pregnant. Both pregnancies were miraculous - Elizabeth's because she was considered too old to conceive, Mary's because she was a virgin. The greeting that Mary received from Elizabeth must have been a moment of serenity, because it elicited pure joy. Luke provides us with Mary's joy-filled response.

**Application:** Reflect on what Mary's song of praise (named the *Magnificat* after its first word in Latin) tells you about the traits God sought in Jesus' mother. What do you learn about the spirit in which Mary took up her noble task? What difference does it make when you know that God is with you and will bring you through what you are facing?

**Prayer:** God, with Mary, help me to glorify you even when I face experiences that I have not expected. Let the knowledge of your presence with me give me the confidence and strength to move forward. Amen.

### **Wednesday, December 11**

#### **Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-14**

My son, don't forget my instruction. Let your heart guard my commands, because they will help you live a long time and provide you with well-being. Don't let loyalty and faithfulness leave you. Bind them on your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and approval in the eyes of God and humanity. Trust in the LORD with all your heart; don't rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight. Don't consider yourself wise. Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. Then your body will be healthy and your bones strengthened. Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first of all your crops. Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will burst with wine. Don't reject the instruction of the LORD, my son; don't despise his correction. The LORD loves those he corrects, just like a father who treats his son with favor. Happy are those who find wisdom and those who gain understanding. Her profit is better than silver, and her gain better than gold.

**Observation:** As she parented her son, Mary undoubtedly drew on passages of Hebrew wisdom like this one. Here wisdom, personified as a woman calling in the public square (Proverbs 1:20), urges her children to live life in accordance with God's principles in order to find true satisfaction. The child should trust, know, fear, and honor the Lord. The child should bind loyalty and faithfulness on the neck and write them on the tablet of the heart.

**Application:** These words themselves aren't "magic," but their presence is a constant reminder of who God is and what God expects from each of us. How have you experienced the difference in living out a principle that is in your heart rather than simply following a rule that's "out there"? How willing are you to submit your ways to God's guidance?

**Prayer:** Lord, I turn to you today, wanting to trust in your faithfulness and direction. Help me to pause before I act and before I speak so that you can speak your ways into my decisions today. Amen.

## Thursday, December 12

### **Scripture: Luke 23:44-49; Psalm 31:5**

It was now about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o'clock, while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. Crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, "Father, *into your hands I entrust my life.*" After he said this, he breathed for the last time. When the centurion saw what happened, he praised God, saying, "It's really true: this man was righteous." All the crowds who had come together to see this event returned to their homes beating their chests after seeing what had happened. And everyone who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance observing these things.

I entrust my spirit into your hands; you, LORD, God of faithfulness—you have saved me.

**Observation:** There is evidence that Jewish parents in Jesus' day taught their children Psalm 31:5 as a bedtime prayer. It seems likely that Mary would have taught it to Jesus when he was a boy. How it must have pierced her heart to hear those familiar words of trust spoken by her dying son!

**Application:** What would it mean to put your life fully in God's hands, not only at moments of extreme difficulty, but every day? What steps will you take during this Advent season to deepen your devotion and trust in God?

**Prayer:** Eternal God, how I want to be able to say with Jesus "into your hands, I entrust my life." Grant me the courage to speak those words and carry them with me throughout the day. Amen.

## Friday, December 13

### **Scripture: Genesis 18:1-13; Genesis 21:1-7**

The LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat. He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply. He said, "Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree. Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant." They responded, "Fine. Do just as you have said." So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, "Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!" Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly. Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate. They said to him, "Where's your wife Sarah?" And he said, "Right here in the tent." Then one of the men said, "I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son!" Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were both very old. Sarah was no longer menstruating. So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, "I'm no longer able to have children and my husband's old. The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Me give birth? At my age?'"

The LORD was attentive to Sarah just as he had said, and the LORD carried out just what he had promised her. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham when he was old, at the very time God had told him. Abraham named his son—the one Sarah bore him—Isaac. Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded

him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. Sarah said, “God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me.” She said, “Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I’ve given birth to a son when he was old!”

*This evening at 7:00 p.m., Messiah Church will offer a service of Healing and Hope. In the midst of the sights and sounds of the Christmas season, you may be experiencing anything but joy. Instead, you may be experiencing the sadness of loss or just feeling depressed. Or you might invite someone who is. In this service, we will offer serenity and hope.*

**Observation:** Mary, like most Jewish girls, no doubt grew up hearing the story of Sarah and the “miracle child” that she bore to Abraham. As she looked back over her life, she must have marveled to think that the same divine power had operated in her life to make her Jesus’ mother!

**Application:** Trust is a central theme in Sarah’s story and in Mary’s. What helps you to trust God even at times when it’s challenging, even when “common sense” might suggest that you shouldn’t trust? How does the Advent season remind you to live in faith-filled hope?

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, that you are God and I am not. Help me to remember that truth and to entrust my life to you, knowing that whatever happens today, you will sustain me and give me the peace that I need to move forward. Amen.

## **Saturday, December 14**

### **Scripture: Acts 1:9-14**

After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, “Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a sabbath day’s journey away. When they entered the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James, Alphaeus’ son; Simon the zealot; and Judas, James’ son—all were united in their devotion to prayer, along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

**Observation:** This passage is the last one in Scripture that mentions Mary, the mother of Jesus. Christian tradition suggests that at some point after this she and the Apostle John, her protector, left Jerusalem to live in Ephesus. How appropriate that this last mention shows her in a circle of disciples committed to prayer!

**Application:** We are given a picture of community life – a spirit of unity and practice of prayer. Unity and prayer are the keys to being “well” no matter what we are facing. What do you think Mary, the eleven apostles (Judas the traitor was no longer with them), Jesus’ brothers and the other women would have prayed about? What special prayer concerns or praises do you have this Advent?

**Prayer:** God, help me to turn to you each and every day, grateful for your readiness to listen. Send me to those places where I can be a calming presence and support to others. Let this be an Advent when I experience fully the life that you offer. Amen.