

**All is Calm: 3. Courage to Change**  
**Matthew 1:18-21**  
**December 15, 2019**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Last Sunday, I invited you to join me in praying the Serenity Prayer each day. So, let's begin with this prayer. *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.*

All week I hope you've been praying for serenity – when you were in traffic, when you were waiting in line. We need serenity in so many places of our lives – our age, our background, the economy, other people. There are all kinds of things we cannot change. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

Here's the question for this morning: **Where do you need the courage to change?** When I look at the Christmas story, there is a command given to every character in the story – and to that command, God offers courage. There was Zechariah, a priest serving in the Temple who feared that he and his wife Elizabeth would never have a child. But one day an angel appeared to Zechariah and said: **“Don't be afraid, Zechariah.”** And then an angel appeared to Mary: **Don't be afraid, Mary, God is honoring you.** When an angel appeared to the shepherds on Christmas night, the angel said: **Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news.** Over and over again in scripture when an angel appeared, the immediate response was fear. We tend to have a Victorian image of angels that does not match what we find in the Bible. We think of angels as sweet, soft characters in flowing white robes with white feathered wings. C. S. Lewis said: *In scripture, the visitation of an angel is always alarming, it has to begin by saying 'Fear not.'* *The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say 'there, there.'*

When the angel comes, it is the call of God on one's life and there are two possible responses. Either it is “no, I'm not going to do it,” or it is “yes.” And the road to No is marked by fear, and the road to YES is marked by courage. And the life you lead depends on the road you choose. No or yes. Fear or courage. We see this choice in each of the Christmas characters, but the battle is especially pronounced in the life of Joseph. Here's what Matthew tells us: **When Mary [Jesus'] mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.** Marriage is a serious commitment. It was then, and it is today. I proposed to Amanda on a park bench in Dallas, Texas on the evening of May 17, 1981. And I was about as afraid as I've ever been – and that was even with both of us knowing the proposal was coming. But I knew she had a choice – yes or not – and I don't know which response terrified me more. What if we got married and it wasn't what we thought it would be. Getting married is an act of courage. Change is always an act of courage.

For Joseph, he finds out the young woman to whom he is engaged is pregnant and he's not the father. This happened in a small town (anybody grow up in a small town?). It's next to impossible to keep a secret in a small town. For all we know someone is already listening in on

the angel's announcement. If Joseph marries a pregnant girl, he will lose his reputation. I remember my dad telling me that in our small town our reputation was everything. He said our name stood for something, and my job was to protect it. Lose it, and we might as well leave town. So when the angel comes, the angel says, "Joseph, son of David..." That's his identity. He was named for that towering character of courage named Joseph – sold by his brothers into slavery who would rise to power and save his father, his brothers, and an entire nation. He's also "son of David." King David was considered the greatest king who ever lived. He united the kingdom and received the promise that the Messiah would be his descendant. And Joseph is a descendant of David. He is Joseph, son of David. He has an identity. We all have one.

Angel said: Marry this woman, raise this child, you have a great destiny ahead of you. Just don't give into fear. But he was afraid, and he was ready to take the No. It's easier that way. The yes means risk, anxiety, uncertainty. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is impossible to exercise courage, if you are not afraid. Courage is moving forward in the presence of fear, acknowledging that fear exists and not being controlled by it. As long as we live, we will experience places of risk, and when we choose courage, we grow into a new place of risk and uncertainty – and when we choose courage, we grow into a new place of risk and uncertainty. It's never-ending. Fear never disappears. I had a routine medical procedure recently. When the nurse entered the room, she asked how I was doing and I said, "great!" Then she took blood pressure. I asked her what it was, and I said, I can't remember when it was that high. And she said, I guess you are not as calm as you think you are. You cannot grow courage by listening to great talks about courage. Courage is a gift from God that appears when we take the YES.

Joseph says YES. He takes Mary as his wife, but that's not the end of fear. After the birth of Jesus, once again an angel appears: "**Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.**" Imagine what Joseph must be feeling when the most powerful person in his world, King Herod, wants to find his child and kill him. That's fear. So they flee to Egypt, and when Herod dies, the angel appears once again and tell him to return to Judea. **But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there.** The fear doesn't go away. And parents, we know about fear, don't we? This child is given to us, this responsibility – and we want to get it right. We want to do everything right. Nothing is more important to us than our children. Imagine, the pressure of raising Jesus. If I get something wrong or I get mad or I say a bad word, I have this sinless Son of God watching me. What if I mess up Jesus? What if I mess up the Messiah, the hope of the world!

An interesting thing in the Bible: Joseph never speaks. Mary, the angel, Herod, the shepherds, the wisemen – they all speak. But Joseph – not a word – he just keeps doing what God asks him to do. God, grant me the courage... And from the beginning, the angel gives Joseph a reason not to give in to fear. And that's the Holy Spirit. He will not be alone – ever. And we do not face life alone – ever. We don't manufacture willpower. We don't conjure up courage. The Holy Spirit is with you. So, the question: Where do you need courage to change? I wanted you to be inspired by a story of change, and last spring as I began planning for this message, I came across the story of Eric O'Grey, who was given the courage to change.

[video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmOqYRWQpZl>]

There's more to this story. The night of Eric's plane ride, Eric got home and was filled with disgust and full of pain, and he did something he had never done before, he prayed. And in his prayer, he asked God to kill him. But in that moment, he had this incredibly intense feeling that he was not alone, and he knew that God was present. When he woke up the next morning, he decided he needed a bible. He had never been to church, never opened a bible, never prayed.

He got a bible, read it cover to cover in a month, and when he finished the book of Revelation, he had another intense experience of God's presence, and he surrendered his life to God. He knew he didn't want to die. He wanted to live. It turns out God answered Eric's original prayer. The old Eric did die that night, and in his place was a man who chose to embrace life.

What's the truth about myself that I most want to avoid? For Eric, it was his weight and that horrible comment "I'm going to miss my flight because you're too fat." For Joseph, the moment of his greatest fear was the beginning – when he took hold of the gift of courage and said YES. Where do you need courage? God is ready. God is waiting to be asked. Maybe it's your body, your anger, your money, or confessing some sin and getting help for a habit that has taken hold of your life. God is in the business of providing courage. Whatever you are facing, God says you can. Whatever you fear, God is in the business of providing courage.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 15, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** 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.

### **Monday, December 16**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 1:18-19; Psalm 18:28-30; Isaiah 43:1-4**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

You are the one who lights my lamp—the LORD my God illumines my darkness. With you I can charge into battle; with my God I can leap over a wall. God! His way is perfect; the LORD's word is tried and true. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.

But now, says the LORD—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. Because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored, and I love you. I give people in your place, and nations in exchange for your life.

**Observation:** As Matthew told it, the story of Jesus' birth began with Joseph engaged to Mary. He learned she was pregnant, and knew he had not done anything to father a child. (It seems he lived in Bethlehem and she in Nazareth, so their families may have arranged the engagement.) No divine messenger had visited Joseph to tell him what was happening. As a devout man, feeling pain and disappointment as his dreams fell apart, he likely sought comfort in Scriptures like today's.

**Application:** Have you ever faced a situation that, even if not as severe as Joseph's, involved some of the same feelings? A time when someone you trusted let you down, and you had to

face pain, disappointment, perhaps anger, perhaps tears, certainly shock? How can passages like Psalm 18 and Isaiah 43 give you a spiritual foundation from which to move ahead in putting your life back together at times like that?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, from the start of the story, your miraculous conception pointed to the fact that your life would upend business as usual in our broken world. Fill me with the courage to let you reshape all the parts of my life that need it. Amen.

**Tuesday, December 17**

**Scripture: Matthew 1:18-20; Deuteronomy 22:20-24**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

However, if the claim is true and proof of the young woman's virginity can't be produced, then the city's elders will bring the young woman to the door of her father's house. The citizens of that city must stone her until she dies because she acted so sinfully in Israel by having extramarital sex while still in her father's house. Remove such evil from your community! If a man is found having sex with a woman who is married to someone else, both of them must die—the man who was having sex with the woman and the woman herself. Remove such evil from Israel! If a young woman who is a virgin is engaged to one man and another man meets up with her in a town and has sex with her, you must bring both of them to the city gates there and stone them until they die—the young woman because she didn't call for help in the city, and the man because of the fact that he humiliated his neighbor's wife. Remove such evil from your community!

**Observation:** In Israelite culture, a betrothal was as binding as marriage. When Mary, betrothed to Joseph, became pregnant, it led Joseph at first to the "obvious" belief that she had been intimate with some other man. Personally painful as that was, Joseph quickly began to realize that the situation might cost Mary's life. If he denounced her publicly, she might be stoned to death (see John 8:3-5), as the law in Deuteronomy said. He sought a different solution, even though it might let some people blame him for her pregnancy.

**Application:** *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* said Joseph was "a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege—siring his firstborn son—in order to obey God's will." Have you had to give up some cherished dream to obey God, or might you have to? If so, how are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, your earthly father showed his righteous character, not in demanding that people follow the law to the letter, but in showing mercy to Mary. Help my righteousness, too, to always lean in the direction of mercy. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 18

### **Scripture: Matthew 2:13-15**

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt*

**Observation:** Counter to the impression given in many Christmas pageants, Joseph did a lot more than stand by the manger while shepherds worshipped baby Jesus. Herod had killed some of his own sons who were potential rivals for his throne, so he certainly wouldn't flinch from deadly action to try to wipe out the newborn Messiah. Matthew said God worked through Joseph's attentive obedience to keep Mary and baby Jesus safe from the king's dangerous paranoia.

**Application:** Joseph surely did not wake up every day and do whatever he had dreamed about the night before. Yet it was a life-and-death matter for him to promptly obey the dreams Matthew recorded. How can you discern which thoughts, dreams or "inner nudges" are from God? (To dig deeper into the question, consider the book, *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard.)

**Prayer:** Loving Lord, like your people of old, you came out of Egypt, thanks to your vigilant, obedient parents. Help me know how to mix wisdom and compassion in welcoming strangers in your name. Amen.

## Thursday, December 19

### **Scripture: Genesis 39:2-10, 41:39-43**

The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man and served in his Egyptian master's household. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful. Potiphar thought highly of Joseph, and Joseph became his assistant; he appointed Joseph head of his household and put everything he had under Joseph's supervision. From the time he appointed Joseph head of his household and of everything he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's household because of Joseph. The LORD blessed everything he had, both in the household and in the field. So he handed over everything he had to Joseph and didn't pay attention to anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome. Some time later, his master's wife became attracted to Joseph and said, "Sleep with me." He refused and said to his master's wife, "With me here, my master doesn't pay attention to anything in his household; he's put everything he has under my supervision. No one is greater than I am in this household, and he hasn't denied me anything except you, since you are his wife. How could I do this terrible thing and sin against God?" Every single day she tried to convince him, but he wouldn't agree to sleep with her or even to be with her.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, no one is as intelligent and wise as you are. You will be in charge of my kingdom, and all my people will obey your command. Only as the enthroned king will I be greater than you." Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Know this: I've given you authority over the entire land of Egypt." Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, he dressed him in linen clothes, and he put a gold necklace around his neck. He put Joseph on the chariot of his second-in-command,

and everyone in front of him cried out, "Attention!" So Pharaoh installed him over the entire land of Egypt.

**Observation:** Jesus' earthly father Joseph was named for a great man in Israel's history. The first Joseph was the patriarch Jacob's favorite son (born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel). Genesis devoted chapters 37-50 to his story. Known for his integrity and reliability, he eventually reached a position from which he saved Egypt (and Jacob's family) from a great famine.

**Application:** In Bible times, as often happens today, parents would choose names that captured the character they hoped and prayed their child would develop. What traits from his great namesake in the Hebrew past could a humble working man like Joseph emulate and live into? Do you bear a name associated with any admirable person, either in your own family or from history? If so, what qualities does that name suggest to you? What qualities is God working into your character through the challenges and opportunities you face in life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, my parents got to choose what I was named at birth. But I get to choose what kind of person that name identifies. Help me, like the famous and the obscure Joseph, to be a person noted for the kind of character you offer to all people. Amen.

## Friday, December 20

### Scripture: Luke 11:11-13; Mark 14:36

"Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want."

**Observation:** We gain a sense of how Joseph went about being a father figure to young Jesus by looking at how Jesus spoke about fathers in his teaching. The failure of too many human fathers, and increasing awareness of the sexism built into many Western cultures, lead us to be cautious in using words like "father" to identify God. But Jesus' parable after teaching the Lord's Prayer showed fathers as giving. When Jesus prayed, he used the term "abba" (Aramaic for "dad").

**Application:** Jesus' words in Luke 11 assumed that it was unthinkable that a father would respond to a child's needs with anything other than an effort to give the best possible gifts. Was that a realistic assumption for you to make about your father or other father figures in your life? If so, how has that shaped the ways you relate to others? If not, how have other people (and God) helped to fill in the gaps left by your father's failures?

**Prayer:** O God, sometimes in church we say, "God is good—all the time; All the time—God is good." Help my relationship with you to keep growing, so that my trust in you is not just church talk, but a living reality. Amen.

**Saturday, December 21**

**Scripture: Matthew 1:20-21; Acts 5:27-32**

As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

The apostles were brought before the council where the high priest confronted them: “In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man’s death.” Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than humans! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and savior so that he could enable Israel to change its heart and life and to find forgiveness for sins. We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

**Observation:** We come back to Joseph, engaged to Mary, doubting her story that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and planning to break the engagement quietly. But in a dream, an angel told him to believe Mary, to proceed with the marriage plans. Joseph found himself in a story much bigger than just one wedding. The angel said to name the child “Jesus” (the Greek form of the Hebrew “Joshua,” which meant “Yahweh is salvation”). Many Hebrews wanted salvation from the occupying Roman army. But the angel didn’t talk about the Romans. This child, he said, would save people from humanity’s greatest enemy: sin. The angel’s announcement became central to how Christians from the earliest days expressed their faith.

**Application:** In his commentary on Matthew’s gospel, N.T. Wright wrote that “Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to but could not of itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the ‘exile’ they have suffered not just in Babylon but in their own hearts and lives.” In what ways has missing God’s path led your heart and life into a kind of “exile”? How have you found the courage to move forward in a direction that God has called you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, though I sometimes forget it, I need a savior. Thank you for coming to be that savior. Grant me the courage that I need to be the person you want me to be. Amen.