**First United Methodist Church**

**618 8th Street**

**Columbus, IN**

**Re. Mackenzie Phillips**

**December 22nd, 2024**

“Words for the Beginning: Hope is Worth the Risk”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 1:18-25 & Luke 1:46-55

We find ourselves on the final leg of our Advent journey. The presents have been bought, the stockings have been hung by the chimney with care, family has arrived, or we have made it to their doorstep. But we as a church have also concluded our Advent festivities – we have seen Christmas lights at Newfield’s, made crafts at Santa’s workshop, passed out hot coco, had lots of cookies and sweets, joined together in Advent study, made space for the grief that comes in this season through our longest night service, and have enjoyed beautiful music provided through our Oratorio and the Sounds of Faith children’s choir.

We have done so much during this season, it seems that there is nothing else we could possibly do, and yet – we are still asked to wait, because our journey is not over, there is still more to come in this Christmas story.

I have always found it ironic that the season of Advent is one of the busiest seasons of the year – because it is meant to be a time of rest, of slowness, of contemplation and wonder. It is the ushering in of a new church year, where we are meant to spend time in reflection and celebration of all that has happened within our church community, and dream about what this new year will bring for our church. And yet, we must be told to slow down, to take breath, to remember the joy and wonder of this season – and to be bold enough to be hopeful and cultivate our dreams of what could be together.

The Christmas story is one many of us have heard for years – and maybe you feel as if it has lost its luster or has become a part of every year church routine. But friends, this story is anything but mundane – it is an unlikely, unexpected, revolutionary, and transformative story – it a story of a people who dared to dream, who dared despite their circumstances of the world around them – to hope that abundance and restoration would come to their lives, their cities, and the world.

On this final week of Advent, we are going to look at the faithful actions of Mary and Joseph as they prepared for their journey to the manger, and how their preparations were filled with unexpected and resilient hope – and encouraged by their stories – to risk being a people who choose to carry hope to the weary word that surrounds us.

**Let us pray: *Holy God, let your Holy Spirit be present with us as we open our hearts and minds to hear the wisdom and encouragement of the Word in this moment. Amen.***

We have arrived – we are finally here – 2 days until Christmas Eve, it’s hard to believe we have made it here. How are you feeling this morning? It’s been a long journey. The truth is some of us come to this space today exhausted, ready to get the celebrations over with, or just plain cranky, while others of us come with excitement, anticipation, and joy of all that this season has brought. Though we all show up differently, we all come together – ready for something new to happen.

Did you know that we have already entered that new thing? Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. So much as changed, and yet some things haven’t – and those same yearnings, painful moments, and dreams are stirring inside us.

I have said to so many people that this church year has felt like a personal whirlwind – and so may changes and moments of joy and pain have happened - I was appointed to serve a new church, faced with health issues of aging grandparents, celebrated my nieces first birthday, graduated seminary, said goodbye to the church where I served the first four years of my ministry, moved to a new city, began ministry in my now church home – and now we are here in the fourth Sunday of Advent.

I know that so much has changed for myself during this church year and yet so much has become richer and more beautiful. And yet – I am ready for something new – I yearn, I hold pain, I have dreams that have not yet come to fruition.

This Advent season has been special in so many ways this year – and for the first time in years – I approached Advent with hope and anticipation – with a yearning to wait, to breath, to dream about what this next church year will bring for myself and for our church.

 That’s the thing about Advent; it comes every year and yet we are never ready for it when it comes around again. Though we want to wait, to breath, to dream – we continue to hurry, to want to get to the next place, the next thing, the next monumental moment. And yet, Advent year after year calls us back, call us to pay attention what has been while at the same time hope and dream what good our future could hold.

 This call to reflection but also anticipation of goodness was not unlike the Israelite people. We must remember that the People of God at the time of Jesus birth were in exile. The foundations of their nation were shaken, and their comfort and security were slowly being stripped away. The human institutions that were supposed to protect them were now causing them harm. Their faith was shaken, it was hard for them to feel peace, or to see God, and they began to look for hope in other places.

In many ways they were in waiting– looking back and remembering the goodness of their past, and yearning and dreaming for something better for their future. They hoped for something that would turn their lives upside down, that would shock them, that would reignite their faith and provide a hope they longed to feel again.

 And though many of them would have known Isaiah’s prophecy, I don’t think any of them would have anticipated that the prophecy would be fulfilled in their lifetime and would change the trajectory of the world they knew and bring forth the world they were hoping for.

 Among those people were Mary and Joseph. I imagine they didn’t expect themselves to be chosen to fulfill the prophecy. In many ways they were just everyday people – Mary a child (scholars believe she was 14-16 years old) whose parents had dedicated her to the lifelong virginity in the Temple of Jerusalem, and Joseph we know little about besides the fact that he was a faithful jew and that he was Jesus earthly Father. They were unlikely people to be chosen by the masses to fulfill the prophecy that would redeem the world, and insight a new hope the Israelite people were yearning for, and yet God chose them.

 But why? Why these two? During our Advent study this year, we studied the characters of the Christmas story that played an essential role in ushering in and sharing the news about Jesus’ birth. A consistent theme throughout the book, and that we see throughout scripture – is that God was always choosing unlikely people (by societal standards) to lead and usher in transformation in our world. The poor, the foreigner, the villain, the everyday joe smos of the world. So maybe the fact that Mary and Joseph were chosen isn’t so shocking at all.

 I like to believe that God knows our path before we do, and equips us with the character, gifts, and abilities we need to carry out the purpose he has for our life. And I think long before they did, that God knew Mary and Joseph brought something essential to the table – that they were a people of resilient hope.

 I mean both are put in an impossible situation – they are to usher in the redemption of the world? Talk about an ancient marvel universe story.

 When Gabriel visits Mary in the Nazareth – he upends everything, she understood about womanhood and motherhood – I mean being a mother may not have even been in her 10-year plan – as her parents had dedicated her to the temple to be a lifelong virgin to maintain her holiness. And now she is being told by some celestial being that she was not only going to be a teen mother, but that she was giving birth to the Messiah – who would one day save the entire world.

 Gabriel was asking her to put her body, her reputation, her life plans at risk for people she didn’t even know. I mean how would you respond? Would you say yes? Mary could have said no, and yet in response she sang a song – glorifying God and a blessing for her to have the opportunity to serve her God faithfully and bring a new hope for generations of people she would never meet.

 And then we have Joseph – what we do know about Joseph was that he was faithful to the law and upheld it. He was a rule follower. So, when his soon to be wife becomes pregnant before their marriage – and he had every right to call off the engagement and expose her to the world, that would have been common practice in that time. He was faced with a daunting choice – can you imagine the anxiety, the fear, the pressure he felt?

 Then Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream – and the angel assures him that everything will be okay, and to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife despite what others would think – because she would give birth to a son who would save everyone from their sins. He was asked to take a risk – to hope that God would protect and keep him.

 Like Mary, he didn’t have to say yes. And yet, propelled by his hope, Joseph uses his situation to express his personal faithfulness, but also to exhibit an act of profound communal responsibility, to protect and stand by Mary. Instead of living out of the fear of what others would think of him, Joseph places his hope in something bigger than himself.

 The Christmas story is not only about a child who would bring hope and redemption to the world. But it is also a story of people, like Mary and Joseph who took a chance to enter God’s redemptive dream for the world – even when it disrupted their understanding and expectations.

 It’s hard to imagine a hope like this, because if were being honest hope is hard. We live in a cynical and broken world – we are told to give up, to live in defeat, to believe that nothing will ever change, that its always going to be this way.

 And in some ways maybe that is true, because we live in a broken world pain and brokenness will always exist in some form. So, to be cynical is the safer path, the straightforward one. However, Mary and Joseph didn’t choose the safe path – and look what happened? Hope was reborn.

 Hope is often defined as an anticipation that something will be fulfilled, or something desired for. But from our stories we learn that hope is all those things and more – it is risky, counter-cultural, and even more it reflects Gods plan for our world – to bring restoration and renewal in the face of death and despair.

 We talk often about how we want to see change in our world – we want to see gun violence, war, poverty, illness, inequality end. And yet most of the time we choose to let cynicism gets in our way. Cynicism beats us down, it covers us in chains, it leads us to inaction – but hope: it challenges us to declare louder than the cynics, that “it can be better,” that we will not be chained to inaction, and empowers us to make it so.

Cynicism will never change the world, but hope does. Mary and Joseph did just this, they hoped against hope. In the face of impossibilities, they chose to believe in the possibility of better world – and stepped into action to make it happen.

 A few years ago, I read the book by Archbishop Desmond Tutu entitled “God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time.” In his book he shares historical and personal experiences as he helped encourage countless South Africans in their struggle to obtain basic human rights. In his work, he writes about what he believes God dream is for the world. In one of the chapters of his book, he writes:

“God says to you, ‘I have a dream. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts. When there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that my children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, my family.”

I’d like to believe that Archbishop Tutu, was a dreamer and a man of immense hope. His work changed my own views of hope. But he touches well on what I think we all deep down hope for – more laughter, joy, and peace. For goodness, compassion, and care to emerge – and for everyone to know that God brought his son into the world for them. I mean, isn’t that the hope we are celebrating in two days?

 The church is often filled with risk-averse narratives, like “the church is dying, no one is coming” or “we don’t have enough money for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_” Sometimes we live into this cynical narrative – and it stops us from daring to dream, to hope for more for ourselves and what God can do in and through us.

The world does not need more cynics, the world needs more hope-bearers. People need us, who already hold a story of hope with us, to pull them out of the trenches of darkness. They need light bearers.

 As I shared, Advent is the beginning of a new church year – so what if we chose to change the narrative? to embrace a different story? Can we even dare to live a different story?

 Saying yes to any of these questions requires us to act – it means we will have to make ourselves vulnerable, to potentially be disappointed, that we surrender our pre-conceived ideas and expectations to open ourselves to thing we never thought possible. It means we are willing to boldly declare that we choose to believe it will be better.

So, who will we be – the cynic or the hope-bearer? Like Mary and Joseph, we get to choose. May we dare to be hope bearers, to bring light to the darkest corners of our world, to declare and believe that better is possible.

***Let us pray: God of hope, the lies of cynicism and the voices of defeat often surround us. It surrounded your people; it surrounded Mary and Joseph and yet hope was reborn. As we prepare our hearts for Christ’s arrival – make room for God presence, and to believe that the same hope held by Mary and Joseph is still possible today. Lead us O God, may our hope be made fresh in you. Amen.***