

“GPS – GOD’S POSITIONING SYSTEM”  
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December 29, 2019

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Matthew 2:13-23

If your house is anything like my house this week, you’ve got a lot of stuff sitting around, right? Presents, cards, decorations – stuff everywhere. So I spent a little time trying to get things under control, sorting through stuff, putting things away, going through piles of mail, newspapers and magazines. And as I was going through that pile of magazines, getting them ready to pass them on to others with whom I share them, I discovered that the covers of every single one of them were filled with tips on how to live in the new year ahead – 2020.

There were tips on how to be more organized, tips on how to eat healthier, tips on trips to take in the new year, tips on how to improve your relationships, tips on how to change your look in 2020. Well, you get the idea. These magazines have jumped on the very real fact that most of us see the start of a new year as an opportunity to make changes, to get better, and to do better.

I think it's safe to say that all of us, when getting ready to walk into a new year, hope that that new year will be a great year in our lives, where good things happen, and we are happy and fulfilled and know love. And, if we had our druthers, all of us would hope that the new year would be pain free, sadness and struggle free, calm and uncomplicated. We would just as soon have everything go according to plan with no major bumps in the road.

I would imagine that that's what two people named Mary and Joseph thought as they started a new year so long ago. They stood looking into a year that would include their marriage to one another after the betrothal period was over. It would include planning a wedding, finding a place where they would live after the marriage. It would include probably doing many of those things our modern day magazines would help them organize!

Life was good for them. Theirs was a perfect match. She, a sweet young maiden; he, a skilled carpenter. Her parents were no doubt delighted that they had made such a good match – Mary would be in good hands, she would be happy with Joseph.

Life at the start of that new year was good, bright, filled with hope and possibility. And then, an angel appeared to Mary, and later to Joseph, and turned their world upside down. Mary was to have a baby, not of Joseph, but of the Holy Spirit. It was startling news to both of them, news that would bring public condemnation on them both, no doubt, news that they both struggled with for a time, but which they eventually embraced.

So right then, they knew, this year was not going to be what they thought it would be. Well, the months rolled on. Everything progressed as normal, but as Mary neared her due date, yet another thing showed up on the horizon to shake their world. A census, of all things! Which meant they would need to travel to Bethlehem to be counted – a rough journey made all the more rough by Mary’s near-term pregnancy.

But travel they did, knowing that God was with them. Yet, when they arrived in town, absolutely exhausted, they could find no room in which to stay. Can’t you sometimes imagine Joseph looking up at God and saying “Really? Can this get any worse?”

But no, Joseph just kept at it, trying and trying, until an innkeeper gave them a place to stay for the night. And there it was, that the Savior of the world was born, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger. Mary and Joseph, in the joy of his birth, yet no doubt bathed in weariness, must have looked at each other and thought, “Who could have imagined this?”

But now that the word from God had been fulfilled, surely they thought things would settle into some kind of normalcy – this new life God had put together for them. Surely when the time was right, they could return to their home and raise this precious child in the midst of their family and friends – it would all be good.

And then came the nightmare we read about in today’s Gospel lesson. Instead of heading home to peace and quiet, they have to literally escape for their son’s life because of Herod’s insecurity and rage over the birth of the Messiah. You heard the lesson, and you know the back story. Herod was the ruler of the day, and he enjoyed great power over the people, and when he heard that Jesus had been born, he flew into a fit. No one would take his place! No one would take the peoples’ allegiance away from him. No one! He wouldn’t stand for it!

He was bound and determined to get rid of this child. And God knew it, and sent an angel to tell Mary and Joseph to get up and go to Egypt to protect their son, which they did. They fled to Egypt, and incredibly sadly, Herod continued to rage and ordered the execution of all baby boys under the age of two. It was a horrible, horrible time.

So now, having expected that they would be at home with their new baby, instead Mary and Joseph find themselves in this new year in a foreign land, where they stayed until Herod died, and then, an angel of the Lord told them to go back to Israel, and so they did, setting up their home in a place called Nazareth.

What a journey that year brought to them! Nothing at all what they expected it to be at the start of the year, and yet, all along the way, it was where God wanted them to be.

I would imagine that there's not a person here in this room today that knows that things don't always turn out as we planned them. We've all heard that line of Robert Burns – “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry” – and we know

the truth of it. As much as we try to make plans and make sure things go well, life has a way of throwing us curve balls, much like it did to Mary and Joseph.

So this morning, as we stand at the threshold of a new year, I would like to invite us to look more closely at what Mary and Joseph did when life threw curveballs at them, for I think their example will serve us well in the days and months ahead.

First, and best of all, they listened to God, and did what he told them to do. When God sent angels into their lives, which he did pretty regularly, they listened and did what they were told to do. They didn't second guess God, even though they knew what was being asked of them was difficult. They both said "yes" to God all along the way – they had total trust in him. Though they didn't know how things would end up, still they trusted him.

I read something this week that in a strange way made me think of Mary and Joseph's journey in that year long ago. James Moore, writes about something called, "sailing under sealed orders." It's something anyone who's served in the Navy probably knows about, but I didn't

A ship is in dock, waiting for their orders. An envelope is delivered to the captain on the bridge of the ship. The envelope is sealed. The captain knows that, inside the envelope, are the crew's orders, details of the ship's mission and destination. Stamped on the outside of the envelope, however, are the words, "SAILING UNDER SEALED ORDERS" – and printed on the outside are coordinates of longitude and latitude – a place in the middle of the ocean to which they are to sail.

For the sake of military secrecy, the captain has been trained not to open the envelope until they get to that spot in the middle of the ocean. So, as Moore says, "the ship and crew set sail, not knowing where they go, but trusting headquarters. When the ship reaches those coordinates of longitude and latitude out there in the middle of the ocean, then the captain opens the envelope and discovers what their destination is and what their mission is." (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, "The Attitude of Confidence," p. 35)

That kind of describes Mary and Joseph, doesn't it? They went where God told them to go, not knowing what they would find, but trusting "headquarters" if you will.

May we do that in this new year, as well. May we listen to God in whatever way God speaks to us – through the voice of an angel, or a friend; in signs and wonders around us; in the words of a scripture or a hymn; in nudges in our souls from the Holy Spirit. May we, when God speaks, like Mary and Joseph, listen and trust him to take us where he wants us to be in the new year ahead.

Secondly, may we adopt the attitude that Mary and Joseph seem to have had – that, though hardships might change things, they would never stop them. What a valuable lesson for us to learn and embrace. So many of you know already, the truth of that, because you have experienced hardships. You know how it feels to have the rug pulled out from under you. Perhaps it was when your spouse died, or when you lost your job, or you got a bad diagnosis from the doctor. Perhaps it was when you were rejected for a position, or your finances fell apart, or well, you fill in the blank. No one gets through life without a hardship or two, and when they come, you have two choices. To let it take you down, and to let it make you stronger.

Mary and Joseph chose the latter – they put their heads down and charged through the hardships and came out stronger in the end. Each one of those hardships, in and of themselves, was overwhelming, but they took it one step at a time and came out on the other side.



I'm reminded of something a woman who was a missionary in the Congo once wrote. Hear her words:

“Older men served as night sentries for our missionary homes. They swept our yards, heated our bath water, guarded our houses, and were most useful in carrying notes at night between homes.

One night I heard a familiar cough. When I went to the door, I could just make out the figure of Papa Jean (one of the most dedicated sentries), holding out a note. It was a dark, tropical night. No moon or stars were shining. There were no street lights on this isolated mission station. A small, six inch kerosene lantern with a smoky chimney in Papa Jean's hand gave the only smattering of light.

*Such a pitiful little light in such a dark night* I thought (she writes). ‘That lamp doesn't give much light, does it, Papa?’ I said. ‘No, it doesn't,’ he answered. ‘But it shines as far as I can step.’” (Ibid, p. 36)

“The light shines as far as I can step.” Oh, friends, those words say it all, especially when we face hardships on our journey. God’s light will lead us through, one step at a time. Hardships may change things, but they never need stop us in our tracks.

Finally, one more thing I think we can learn from Mary and Joseph is, that through it all, they had absolute trust that God was with them. They were never alone on their journey. No matter where life took them that year, they knew that God was with them, and that all would be well.

May you and I remember that as well, as we walk into a new year, a new decade – a time full of promise and possibility!

Let me leave you with these words that I have on a sampler on one of the walls in my house. It goes like this:

“I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year. ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness, and

put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.”

May all of us, as we enter 2020, put our hands into the hands of God, and like Mary and Joseph, listen to him, lean on him, and trust that he is with us every step of the way. May it be so.

Amen.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, started every year, in fact, every day, saying a prayer we've come to call, "The Wesley Covenant Prayer." In it, he gives everything over to God, including himself. I want to invite us to do that as well, so let us turn to page 607 now, and pray that prayer together.