

(Pray) May the meditations of my mind, the words of my mouth and the love in my heart be pleasing to you Lord.

By a show of hands how many of y'all have heard it said, "Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year"? **(pause for response)** I have heard that phrase too, but when I turn on the news, or listen to the radio, or go down here to write sermons at Bojangles I hear and see something very different. I see news about impeachment hearings. I hear news about Brexit in England and refugees from Syria. The city of Detroit and the entire country of Greece are bankrupt. There are school shootings and church bombings. I was sitting in Bojangles just this last week and from across the dining area I heard a woman going toe to toe with her health insurance company over the phone. This last week we had Thanksgiving on Thursday and the Black Friday deals started Thursday afternoon. How many of y'all have ever been out shopping on Black Friday? **(pause)** How many of y'all have ever worked retail on Black Friday? **(pause)** Well, enough of us have seen it I won't bother describing it, but there's A LOT of unchristian behavior on Black Friday. Amen? **Amen.** My sisters and brothers is this what Christmas has become? Thanksgiving comes and goes. The shopping begins, and here we are on the first Sunday of Advent and perhaps many of us are already thinking, "This is going to take a lot of work." There are trees to be bought and decorated. Lights to be hung outside; Christmas parties at school and with friends and family, the influx of out of town guests, the gift buying, wrapping, giving, receiving and exchanging... I'm already tired and it's only December 1st. We are a long way from the birth of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords; the one who will be Emanuel, God with us. Perhaps it is a good time to remember it isn't Christmas yet. It is the beginning of Advent.

With all of that in mind we come to Mary. Mary who is at the outset of a very different kind of journey. Y'all think about Mary for a minute. Mary is somewhere between 12 and 16 years old; 12 and 16. Think about that. To quote the Golden Girls, "the plumbing is installed, but the house is not ready to occupy." **(pause)** And yet there is a baby growing in her womb. At 12 many young mothers miscarry. Mary has to wonder can she carry this baby full-term? Plus, let's not forget in the first century there are no epidurals; no modern medicine; many women and babies die in child birth. That is scary. Mary is betrothed to Joseph, but the marriage has not been consummated. This is not Joseph's child. When word gets out and Joseph is humiliated he has the right to cancel the engagement and turn Mary away (Matt 18:19). Plus Mary's life was in danger. According to the Law of Moses,

"if the thing is true, that the tokens of virginity were not found in the young woman, ²¹then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has wrought folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you. (Deut. 22:20-21).

The way I interpret this passage is both Joseph and Mary have a huge uphill climb. I think everybody here knows just how important a person's reputation can be in a small town. Here in Denton if somebody does something stupid or gets in trouble on a Tuesday the whole town is gonna know about it by Friday – except for the preacher who will probably find out about it Sunday morning. By following through with the marriage to Mary because the whole town knows Mary is pregnant and the baby is not his, Joseph's reputation is mud in that town. Joseph is a carpenter or tradesman of some kind. His ability to get work is dependent upon his reputation. In the Bible everybody is the Son of somebody. However, Jesus is the son of Mary, his mother. Very likely this was a put down for Joseph, and would have hurt Joseph's ability to find work. People would doubt his reason and common sense – both of which are important for a tradesman. At any rate, their financial future was in doubt. That has to be a concern for Mary.

Mary is soon to be a young mother, very young even by first century standards in Palestine. I have watched my wife go through four pregnancies. I have been in the room when she gave birth to all four of our children. I can tell you, from what I have seen bearing children is no joke. It's hard. Hormones run crazy so the women don't feel

or act like themselves. The body changes and for some women doesn't go back. Uncomfortable does not begin to describe what some women go through during their pregnancy. The Bible does not give us any details about Mary's pregnancy, but there are good odds it was not easy. When you add the fears about Joseph, Joseph's job situation, and the very real fears about the birth itself Mary had every excuse to be all, "Woe is me! How can God do this to me? This isn't fair! Why me? Why not somebody else?" Honestly, I wouldn't have blamed her for being moody, irritable and depressed. The Bible is certainly full of people who reacted in just that way. (pause) Church, does Mary do any of that? (pause) How does Mary respond to being told she is to give birth to the Messiah? (pause for responses) How does Joseph respond to the news the woman he is engaged to is pregnant with the Son of God? (pause for responses)

This is what Mary says, (read Luke 1:46-55).

Mary chooses to be grateful. Mary chooses happiness instead of sadness; love instead of fear; joy instead of depression. (pause) Some might say that is a little too pie in the sky. This girl and her fiancé had real problems. They had a lot to worry about, and good reason to be afraid for their lives. For all of my Star Wars friends out there you might remember this line from *Return of the Jedi*, "You are going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view." Joseph valued righteousness. The Biblical definition of righteousness is a right relationship with God and a right relationship with your neighbor. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "[...] you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Leviticus 19:18b says, "[...] you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." Or as Jesus put it Himself in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." Joseph loved Mary as himself. Joseph went ahead and married Mary and did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born. Joseph then worked hard to provide for Mary and Jesus. In this way Joseph worked to respect his relationship with God and with those around him. Truly Joseph must have been a righteous man. How many of us would have made the same choices?

Mary also made choices. Mary chose to hold on to faith instead of giving into fear. Mary chose not to do anything that would prevent her from having a healthy baby. How many times does Scripture tell us Mary saw things or heard Jesus say things and chose to ponder those things in her heart?

Perhaps the biggest lesson in the first chapter of Luke is how Mary and Joseph chose to look at their situation. How many of us know what it is to do what is right and grumble and complain about it all along the way to anyone who will listen. Mary and Joseph didn't do that. Joseph was raising and working to support a child that was not his. Nowhere in Scripture does it say Joseph complained. We certainly cannot say that about Jeremiah. Mary not only doesn't complain. Mary sings praises to God. Mary sings praises to God for all of the ways God lifts up the poor and needy and humbles the rich. Mary is happy about what is happening to her and the journey she is beginning with this pregnancy.

When it comes to the journey of Advent we should probably do the same. How about instead of dreading the march to Christmas we consider what Advent is really all about. Advent is a time for honoring God by doing our very best to put God first by putting this child first. This child who would be known as God with us; Emmanuel. As Christians we have to choose to look past all of the "do-ing" in December. Perhaps we should be more focused on Rejoicing. Maybe instead of complaining about all that needs to be done in December we should consider the birth of Christ is the birth of one who will teach us to put down all of the crazy concerns and expectations in the world, and to instead take up the yoke of Christ, because Christ's yoke is easy and His burden is light. Maybe changing the way the look at Advent and taking the time to set aside the traditions and craziness that take us away from what this month is really all about would be a good thing – we just might get the rest we need before the birth of Christ, and as a result we might all really have something to rejoice. In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen