

Sermon – Dec. 18, 2016

Obedience: It's not a word we say often. I think in part that's because the meaning of it scares us – at least a little.

It means we have to be submissive. We have to give up some of ourselves to be obedient. We don't necessarily do what we want to do. In fact, sometimes obedience requires us to do something difficult.

Humankind has struggled with obedience almost from the very beginning. Think back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve lived in paradise, with God walking with them among the vegetation. They were told they could eat of any fruits in the garden, except for the fruit from one tree in the center of Eden.

One rule. One way to show obedience. Humankind couldn't handle it.

We haven't advanced all that much, unfortunately. When we're kids we start pushing limits. My wife likes to tell the story of our daughter, Emily – at a very young age – being told not to touch a stove that Amy just been using to prepare a meal. Emily kept testing her by moving her finger closer to the stove, only to have Amy catch her and tell her “Stop! You'll get burned, and it's going to hurt.” Eventually, Emily snuck through, though, and she reached out her little index finger and, of course, got burned.

There was pain. There were tears. Both are often the result of failure to be obedient, hot stove or otherwise.

Unfortunately, a lack of obedience can cause pain well into adulthood. If we break a law, let's say driving faster than the posted speed limit, we may face a hefty fine. If we do something more serious – take something that isn't ours or harm another person physically – then we face the possibility of losing our freedom.

When it comes to obedience or disobeying those in authority, there are consequences.

In [Matthew 1:18-25](#), we read the short version of the birth story of Jesus. In this account, we don't read about a manger. We don't learn about the journey of shepherds to worship the newborn King. We don't even get the part about there being no room for them in the inn!

What kind of Christmas story is this?

Well, this Christmas story is one of obedience. It tells of how a young woman – likely really a girl by today's standards – received a call from God to take on what at that time must have

seemed like the biggest responsibility ever. And it tells the story of a man who could have used many social conventions under the Jewish Law to cast aside this girl but instead listened to what God directed him to do.

The woman was, of course, Mary. The man was Joseph. And both, in their own way, chose obedience that at times must have brought them discomfort and, perhaps, some pain. But their willingness to listen to God provided all of us with the greatest gift of all: the Savior who delivers us from sin and death.

To sum it up: We get an eternal benefit from these two people being willing to say “yes” to God. Their obedience paved the way for us to be saved from our disobedience.

What must Mary have been doing when the angel appeared to her – a young virgin – and told her what was going to happen? She likely would have been sewing garments, planting foods, preparing meals – cruising the market with her friends. She would have been helping her family make ends meet.

She didn’t have the distractions that today’s kids do. Teens today don’t have it easy. Some literally help their families pay the bills. Some face intense pressure to succeed in school or in athletics. Some face addiction. Many face bullying of various degrees. And there’s that awkwardness that comes for all of us at one point in time during our teenage years.

But we can only imagine how much the scandal of a young, unwed woman’s pregnancy would escalate in ancient Nazareth if Twitter had existed back then. Can you imagine?
#shemusthavecheated #unwedmother

Here is a girl, most likely trying to contribute to her family’s economic well-being, when she gets the news that she is pregnant. Unlike other young people who face that kind of news, she knew she had not done anything sexual to bring on such a life-altering decision. She must have been scared. In fact, the story of Jesus’ birth in Luke tells us she was “greatly troubled.”

No doubt part of that troubled feeling came because she was engaged to a local guy named Joseph – a carpenter, our tradition teaches us. Mary must have been fearful about what this news would have done to the wedding that was being planned. Talk about a life-changing event!

We don’t know how much time Mary and the angel discussed this news. But in Luke 1:38 we read that Mary eventually says, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”

In other words, Mary decided then and there to say “yes.” She chooses to be obedient.

So, what about Joseph? We tend to visualize him as an adult man. And he is about to get the worst news that a groom-to-be can receive. The woman he is engaged to marry is pregnant. And he knows the child is not his.

In today's society, this scenario often leads to two emotional states: rage and devastation. Anger at the concept of his beloved running around on him behind his back. Devastation that his beloved has considered him unworthy of being her partner.

In those days, as in these, there is shame. What would those Twitter posts look like from the boys who lived down the road or the guys at the carpenter's guild? #loser #cheatedon #fail

Scripture doesn't tell us a lot about Joseph. But it does tell us from the beginning that he was a righteous man. The indication is that he loved God. He followed the Jewish laws. By his actions, he must have truly loved Mary, because we learn that he didn't want to humiliate her – although that was certainly allowed under the customs of the time. He decided instead to quietly call off the engagement.

As the story continues, an angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because she is blameless. In fact, she is pregnant now because of how much God has found favor with her. The child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph gets a look into the future: Mary will give birth to a son, a treasured offspring, particularly for a first child in ancient Israel. They will name the child Jesus. And, by the way, this child is going to save his people from their sins. He even gets a reference to Isaiah 7, a prophecy about what is about to happen.

Everything in this situation points to the guy – Joseph – saying “No way! Count me out.”

But verse 24 tells us “When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.”

When many other people would have said “no.” Joseph said “yes.” He chose to be obedient to God.

Mary and Joseph said “yes” to a huge responsibility. They were charged with bringing the son of God into the world. They were given the task of raising him, teaching him the Jewish Law and the culture's customs. They were asked to give Jesus the foundation upon which His ministry would be built – a ministry that truly changed the world.

That was one heck of a “yes” answer to being obedient.

After the birth story of Jesus, we don't hear much about Joseph. He appears briefly – not even named – in a story about Jesus disappearing and ending up teaching in the temple when he's 12 years old. Then Joseph is gone from the pages of our Bible.

Mary comes in and out of the stories of Jesus. She obviously was there at his birth, but she is at

the foot of his cross at his death.

And Jesus, obviously, is the foundation for our Christian faith. We read all about him in the four Gospels, the Acts of the apostles and in the letters that follow in the New Testament.

But His story continues through the modern day through us. We're directed to play a part in the ongoing story, to make disciples. But there's a hitch: We have to be obedient and say "yes."

We're not virgins asked to give birth. We're not men asked to care for a child that wasn't ours by blood.

Instead, we're asked to help give birth to new Christians through professions of faith. We're asked to care for all kinds of people with whom we have no relation by serving as the hands and feet of Christ in our world today.

Mary and Joseph had the tough part. She had to give birth. He had to endure shame. Both had to overcome fears of ridicule, whispers and, likely, hurtful gossip.

They didn't have to accomplish their important tasks alone. God was with them every step of the way.

Philippians 2:12-13 tells us that "God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes."

Do you have a fire in you today to tell others about Christ? Do you know someone who needs what you have, talking about a relationship with Jesus? If so, don't stay silent. Don't let fear of ridicule get in the way; whatever you may face is nothing compared to what the earthly parents of Jesus faced.

Know that Jesus wants you to make disciples. God expects you to do your part, if you truly are a follower of Christ.

The Philippians verse tells us about God's "good purposes."

We can be part of that by being obedient. We can be part of it by saying "yes."

Amen.