

## **“Hope and The Pursuit of Happiness”**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**November 29, 2020**

**First Sunday of Advent**

Here it is, Advent. A few elves and I thought it would warm your hearts a bit to enjoy messages and music from inside our church sanctuary. We can't have you physically here, so this is the next best thing. This is the pursuit of happiness for our Christmas season 2020.

Today's theme is Hope. We light the Advent candle of Hope for a better world, for an end to the pandemic, for a peaceful exchange of governmental leaders, and for a new era of racial justice and equity. We ring in the sounds of hope for all those who have lost their jobs or businesses, for whom government aid has run out and for whom the winter is the bleakest. In the film I showed this past Friday, Will Smith and his son, Jayden Smith play a single father and little son who are struggling against a tide of implicit racism and economic uncertainty.

In this true story of hope lost and hope found, Chris Gardner lives a dual life: by day he is an entrepreneur and an unpaid stockbroker intern, and by night he and Christopher, age 5, are homeless and increasingly desperate. Chris is always on the move, walking, and at times running to catch up to a brighter future for himself and his young son. Will Smith told Oprah Winfrey in an interview that playing the part of Chris Gardner with his real-life little son, Jayden, brought to him the stark reality of his responsibility for his boy's safety, daily well-being and future. He said, "I laid there with my son and just imagined the sense of failure that you would feel as a parent, you know? And to feel like you're failing like that," Will says. "But then the other side, the yin and the yang, to all things is that you have the power for it to be different."

Chris Gardner, the subject of the film, said this of an exchange he had with his own son when they finally got a house of their own. "To explain to your child that, 'No, son, we have a key now. We're home. We don't have to carry things anymore.' He explained to the interviewer, "There are no words to tell you what that felt like. The only way I can express it would be if I could levitate myself off of this chair."

Chris's son, Christopher, says he doesn't remember much about life on the street. "I didn't know we were homeless. I just remember that we were doing a whole lot of moving," says Christopher, who is now 25 years old. "I just know that when I looked up, he was there. I looked around, and [my dad] was there." Chris says he worked hard to create a sense of normalcy for Christopher. "We may not have known where we were going, where we were going to eat, or where we were going to sleep, but we were together every day," Chris says. "And there are probably a lot of folks whose children live in million-dollar houses who can't say that."

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Today's scripture is from the Gospel of Matthew, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter, but first, I must give you a little disclaimer: Advent starts a new liturgical year. We just finished the year of Matthew, and we are supposed to be moving on to the Gospel of Mark. Great, I am ready for some new scripture material, but here's the problem: There is no Jesus birth story in Mark; he starts his Gospel out with Jesus as a grown man!

We have already lost so much this year due to the pandemic, and I just don't think it's right in this season when we are excluded from the physical sanctuary of the church to do without the traditional nativity stories. So, if it's alright with you these next few weeks, I am going to use Matthew and Luke and their Christmas

stories to frame my talks about the four cornerstones of Advent: Hope, Faith, Joy, and Love.

Today we start with Hope.

I don't know what Joseph hoped for in his life, but I doubt that he ever wrote in his diary that he hoped to marry a girl who, before their marriage, mysteriously one day wakes up pregnant. It must be a hard pill to swallow for a simple man living a simple life. Mary's news had the very real potential to ruin him, for a young maiden was expected to be a virgin on her marriage day.

The text tells us that at the disclosure of her pregnancy, Joseph was looking for a way out of his engagement to Mary. An angel came to him in a dream, a dream in the midst of his nightmare. The angel told him to follow through with the engagement, to marry his intended who would give birth to a special child, a child of God's Holy Spirit. Joseph was allowed little say in the matter; who could disobey a direct order from an angel? He was not allowed to name the child—he was to be named "Jesus"—or 'God Saves.' There and then, his hopes for a normal married life dashed, Joseph became a non-factor in history. He barely appears later in the Jesus story, and he disappears without note by any of the Gospel writers.

Hope. In Advent, we celebrate the hope of our faith realized in the Christ child. We speak of hope in the midst of a pandemic sickness the world does not yet know how to manage. The numbers of dead and diseased grow daily; our hospital workers are stretched to their breaking point and our resources, the vast resources of this country, have not been effectively marshalled to meet the burgeoning needs growing by leaps and bounds each day.

We speak of hope in the aftermath of one of the bloodiest political battles most of us have ever experienced. The election healed nothing. The extreme sides

of the major parties are still as triggered and anxious as ever. We will not experience a smooth and civil transfer of power from one President to his successor. There is violence in the streets and a threat of more.

We speak of hope here in a relatively calm and safe part of our state, while so many hundreds of square miles have burned right down to the ground just miles from us, wreaking havoc and destroying wildlife habitats in some of the most vulnerable ecosystems.

We speak of hope when businesses are closing by the thousands, workers displaced and dreams for economic independence shattered. Many of the storefront and service businesses cannot come back from this. Evictions are happening in record numbers. Still, we do not talk to our families who voted for the other candidates. Thanksgiving dinners were eaten in silence on TV trays in front of the television, and Christmas celebrations are being planned not for this year, but for next.

We speak of hope when we are so unsettled and so unsure of the immediate future, much less the distant one. We are in Joseph's shoes on this, the first Sunday of Advent. We are in Chris Gardner's shoes today when he is holding his little son in a locked restroom in a San Francisco train depot where he has hidden them in relative safety for the night.

Hope is the hardest of all the Advent spiritual practices. It's a hard one to start with. I sit here in front of our sanctuary's familiar Christmas tree and I think how easy it was last Christmas when we could hang the greens together, practice the Cantata and the children's pageant in person, and gather for a Christmas Eve Silent Night and in-between-services potluck. I used to think it was so hard; now I long for the long day and the satisfied feeling Chris and I had as we drove home

after our worship services. I enjoyed falling into bed exhausted, but happy that we had such a lovely church and knew such wonderful people of God, our church family.

I know this flat screen leaves you kind of flat; it is bound to. It's not the same as being in the sanctuary, I know *that*. It's strange for me, too, having just a few people here to help me record this message for you. Thanks be to Don & Martha Sprague, Rosanne French, Shellie Luallin, and to our wonderful musical artists for bringing today's worship to you from here. But along with acknowledging our longing to be together and sadness that we are not able to worship in person I hope you also feel grateful that our church life moves on, always forward.

I am grateful that our church family has for the most part stayed connected, and has welcomed folks who before missed out on our community worship-the liturgy, music, prayers, scripture readings, monthly communion, shared joys & concerns, children's time and sermons. We are staying healthy; we are staying safe. Yet, we are not playing it safe. We are out there in our own television land; we are publicly and joyfully proclaiming our faith; we are celebrating the Season of Advent with intention and purpose,, and we are yearning-yea *hoping* that an angel of God will visit us in our sleep and tell us that we, too, are to carry the Christ child into the world.

Hope for Chris Gardner and his little son, Christopher, was the energy that saved them.

Hope for Joseph was the foundation that caused him to answer the angel's call in the affirmative.

Hope for us is realized in the knowledge that God will never abandon us. Angels will be sent; the Christmas story will be told year after year to delighted

children with young, excited eyes and ears as well as to those whose eyes are dimming and whose hearing is fading. We will speak our joyful prayers when once again, the Christ child is born and the world will be changed forever for the better.

We are not alone, especially when we are sure we are. God is near. God's angels will sing their love songs to you tonight and your heart will hear them even when your waking brain cannot. We wait; we hope; we invite God into our lives; we say as did Mary did oh so long ago, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy will."

*May It Be So.*

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