

Courage to accept God's invitation.

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24: 36-44

So, how are you feeling today? Are you filled with trepidation, anxiety, fear, or uncertainty? Are you worrying about all the details that come with preparing for Christmas? Perhaps you are anxious that the Christmas holidays will be restricted again. Perhaps you are worrying about your loved one is doing in this time of great expectation. Perhaps your worries tie into the political climate and uncertainty about the decisions that various political leaders are and will make. Perhaps your fears are simply tied into surviving, getting through day by day. Do I have enough to eat? Can I afford to keep my house warm? Perhaps like many of us when you heard these words in the passage from Matthew you felt apprehensive. Matthew wrote for as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking until the day Noah entered the Ark and then they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. Maybe you heard the words keep awake therefore for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming. And maybe when you heard those words you felt threatened. This doesn't feel like the kind of message that we would expect to receive as we prepare for Christmas and start the Advent season. And you're correct both scriptures actually invite us to trust in God. Not to feel threatened, not to worry about what might happen but to trust in God. To believe in God's promise of what is to come. Isaiah's vision is a gleaming promise of what God will do in the days to come. And in Matthew, as we hear the words about Noah, what we need to hold onto and remember is that God promised to never wipe us all out again. Bruce Birch, a biblical scholar writes, God is inviting us to "lift our sight beyond the challenges and crisis of our own time, to participate with the generation since Isaiah in the hope for a world transformed by the final goal of

peace and harmony toward which God is moving us.”¹ Toward which we are being invited to move.

Since September we’ve been taking time to explore different virtues. We started with the virtue of humility and then gratitude. In this season of Advent, we want to practice the virtue of courage. The Virtues Project which Dirk introduced me to, states that:

“Courage transforms fear into determination. It is embracing life fully without holding back, doing what must be done, even when it is difficult or risky. When we’re tempted to give up courage supports us to take the next step. It allows us to face adversity with confidence. Courage opens us to new possibilities and gives us the strength to sacrifice for what we love. At times we need courage to accept the truth and to pick ourselves up after a mistake, ready to make amends and try again. Courage gives us the strength to make this journey with all of our heart.”²

In the season of Advent we learn about the courage it took for Elizabeth, Zachariah, Mary, and Joseph, the Shepherds, the wise ones who came bearing gifts, the innkeeper, and all those not named who played a part for the arrival of Jesus here on earth. Jesus who will be named Emmanuel, which means God with us. God is sending us the Prince of Peace, the bearer of peace. And then the birth of an innocent child. God brings us hope.

Advent is the journey to the manger where God’s promise is fulfilled, where love is found, where love will grow. Where courage will lead to a new way of living. So, the question for us today is – are you ready? Are you prepared for what is to come? The passage from Matthew was entitled in the Bible the necessity of watchfulness. Listen to the words from Matthew again – keep awake therefore, for you do not know that day that the Lord is coming. Now the translation of this passage in the original Greek language actually uses the word watch instead of keep awake – watch therefore for you do not know when the time will come. It’s hard to watch something when we’re distracted by fulfilling unrealistic expectations of the perfect Christmas. I honestly can’t image how Mary would

¹ Bruce Birch, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 7.

² Virtues Project, “Virtue Reflection Cards” on Courage

have survived had she put the same expectations on herself that we do. Can you imagine her trying to get everything prepped before she made the journey to Bethlehem? Trying to find the perfect plan. It wouldn't have happened. How often do we end up feeling disappointed when the perfect plan or the perfect present isn't found. Or when someone ends up with a cold and can't make it. Or a flight's been delayed or cancelled. Or the dinner doesn't cook on time.

The challenge we face is how do we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus. How will we have the courage to accept God's invitation to believe in the promise that peace on earth can and will happen. Peace will come to this earth. To be watchful is to be present, fully present to the moment, fully present to what another person is saying to us. Fully present to whatever it is the other person near us is feeling and experiencing. The virtues project invites us to practice courage. And I want to share this practice with you now as I believe it will help us to watch, to be aware, to be ready to make some bold decisions. So, again I invite you to close your eyes and listen closely to these words. Here is how we practice courage. I reach beyond my comfort zone. I welcome new challenges. I do what I know is right regardless of the costs. And I face the truth with humility and openness. I don't allow my fears to hold me back. I fully accept life's invitations. Now open your eyes and be mindful and watch. I want to alter that last statement and say that I fully accept God's invitation. How will you find hope in your life this week? How will you notice God's spirit at work bringing hope to this world. How will we as a Community of Faith have the courage to live our lives in faith, in unconditional love without falling under the influence of the secular society and secular expectations. Have the courage to simplify your and focus on what is most important at this time. Your relationship with God. Your relationship with your loved ones. And your love for strangers and people in need. May we be open to the hope that comes when we trust in God and trust in the promise of love. Amen.