

December 18, 2016  
Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Follow Immanuel—Even With a Sigh”

Matthew 1:18-25

Heavy sigh. We’ve all done it; the heavy sigh. It’s like when you get a rare clear day in your schedule and you make plans to get all kinds of things done. Then the phone or the doorbell rings and it’s family, a friend or a neighbor and they need you to do something that you really don’t want to do—a ride to the airport, maybe help out with some happening at church, maybe to help them move—whatever. It’s going to totally mess up your plans, but you know you’re going to do it, and it comes out: the heavy sigh. (Sigh) Okay.

I’ve kind of got this picture in my head about Joseph. Mind you, it’s just how I see it; I can’t say it’s based on Holy Scripture. I think Joseph let one of those heavy sighs rip when he woke up that morning. We know precious little about Joseph, but we do know that he was a just man, merciful in not wanting to put Mary to shame for her indiscretion and pregnancy. I think it’s a given that he was a faithful believer in Yahweh and the promise of Messiah in Scripture.

But I think he was a man who, like most of us, had his plans and hopes for the future kind of mapped out in his head—get married, continue in the family business, have some kids and, by the grace of God, die at a ripe old age with great grandkids surrounding the bed. I think Joseph woke that morning, realized what God had called him to do, and let out a heavy sigh. (Sigh) Okay.

And I think it wasn’t the last time he sighed, either. We’re not exactly sure how the timing worked out, but it may well be that family and neighbors figured out this pregnancy came about prior to any wedding vows. There may very well have been whispers and snickering behind Joseph’s back—things a “just man” would really resent—and Joseph would sigh, say “okay” and just roll with people thinking what they thought.

Later, another dream and packing up to run to Egypt with Mary and baby Jesus. (Sigh) Okay. And the time Jesus went missing for three days in Jerusalem and when they found Him, He says right to Joseph’s face, “*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*” (Sigh) Okay.

How can Joseph just roll with this? God had placed Jesus in his life, the Messiah who would save His people from their sins. Yes, in the short term, in the world, this task of step-parenting the very Son of God may have sometimes seemed like a burden, may have caused hardship and strife. But Joseph knew the simple fact that it was Yahweh’s will that he care for Christ. And He knew that in doing so, he relinquished his life to God’s plan of salvation for himself and the entire world.

As you and I look back on that first Advent of Christ in the world and anticipate His return in glory, perhaps we should compare ourselves to my characterization of Joseph. We don’t have to change baby Jesus’s diaper or cart him off to Egypt, but the Holy Spirit has bestowed on us the gift of Jesus Christ, Immanuel: God with us; that precious gift of faith trusts and believes this child lived, died and rose again to save us, His people, from their sins.

When the possession of this gifts calls us to a sacrificial course of action, how do we react? When the way of Christ is at odds with the path we desire for ourselves in this world, which road do we choose? When the humility of this Christ we know dwells in us calls us to make ourselves lowly, do we?

I can't help but think of the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 29: "*A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?*"

I see that first son kind of like Joseph, not really wanting to do the will of the father but, heavy sigh, "Okay." But there's a lot of Christians in the world who act like the second son, singing in church and speaking all the love of Jesus words, but when that gift of Jesus, Immanuel—God with us, really calls them to action there is no (sigh) "Okay." There is just, "No, thanks. I've got other plans."

What kind of caretaker of the gift of faith are you?

It would be awesome if we all could say we are the enthusiastic, humble, self-sacrificing lover of Jesus that we should be. But let's face it, poor, miserable sinners in a fallen and broken world that we are, that's asking a lot and maybe setting an unrealistic goal.

But how about a heavy sigh caretaker? Can we at least shoot for that? Are you even trying for that?

The righteousness of Christ dwelling in you knows what God's Word calls for in terms of sexual purity in thought, words and deed. When temptation comes are you sighing and saying "Okay" and pushing away that TV show, that website, that embrace that's tempting you? Or are you simply saying I've got my own plans for life. Sorry faith. Sorry Jesus. No thanks.?"

When there is opportunity to sacrifice time or treasure for another, is there even a pause and a sigh, a prayerful consideration of if this is your Lord's leading. Or is your response an immediate, "I've got things to do and places to be. I've got plans for me and my money.?"

When there is a clear call to be meek and lowly, forgiving of somebody who has dared to offend you, to pretty much just be Jesus to somebody who doesn't deserve it, can you (sigh) "Okay" and be low? Or must you assert, "I have my pride!" and defend yourself, demean another, hold a grudge and be sure your standing is not lowered in anybody's eyes?

Can we be heavy sigh Christians? Can we try?

I think we better. I think we better because doing so is living out the faith and bearing our cross, our stewardship of the priceless gift of saving faith. I think we should because what we put into practice becomes our faith, and "No thanks, I've got other plans" is not the faith you wish to hold that day Jesus returns in glory. I think we should because Saint Paul says it is through the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ "*we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name...*" and the converse of that is the disobedience of unbelief, and it is unbelief that condemns.

If you find this troubling because you are mired in such disobedience, good. It's not too late. Repent. Forsake the world, look to the Way of life Christ has gifted you with in your Holy Baptism and say, (sigh) "Okay" and start walking in it.

It's not too late because Jesus Christ was praying in a garden one night, and God's will was clear to Him. He wasn't eager for it. He didn't want it. But He responded righteously, (Sigh) "Okay," and He walked to the cross to die for you. He did so in agony, carrying your disobedience of unbelief and every other form of your sin on His shoulders. He did die with it and damned it to the grave. But He is risen from the dead and stands the Son of God in power by that resurrection. He is now in power Immanuel, God with us.

This day and every day, repent and turn from your sins again. It may mess up your plans. It may cost you something of the world. It may lower your standing in the eyes of others and even lose you some friends. But does any of that matter when you can turn to the God of all

eternal glory and know that despite all your sin and disobedience, when you turn to Him in faith for forgiveness, He responds, (sigh) “Okay”?  
Amen.