

Every year, we buy the United Methodist Program Calendar for the church office. It gives our worship leaders the information they need to plan Sunday services for each church season: Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter. It gives our altar helpers the information they need to have the correct paraments on the altar, white for holy days or blue, green, or red for the liturgical seasons. And it gives suggestions for Bible passages that might be used for sermons in each season, since a passage that is appropriate in Epiphany may not be a good fit for Pentecost.

As we have moved through this pandemic year, it has felt like the 2020 Program Calendar was a wasted expenditure, however, as we really didn't use it as we typically do. Nevertheless, we have bought the 2021 Program Calendar. We bought it because we trust that God will take us through this "*winter of our discontent*" (to quote Shakespeare) by enabling us to experience hope, peace, joy, and love (to quote the traditional Advent themes) even in times of difficulty.

To lean into God's promise that we can experience hope, peace, joy and love even in the "*winter of our discontent*," we also have been moving through an Advent series titled A Corona Christmas Journey. Each week, we have looked at a town in the Christmas story, and how it could be looked at not just as a physical place, but also a symbol of a LIFE EXPERIENCE, a time when God not broke through the ordinary (and sometimes difficult) occurrences of life to do something extraordinary (and bring about hope, peace, joy and love in the midst of pains).

We have done that because we believe that God did not stop the process of saving humanity with Mary, Elizabeth or Joseph. We have done that because we believe that God continues to invite His followers to let Him do something similar in the pains and troubles of their lives. And we have done that because we believe that God calls us to be such a witness to His hope, peace, joy, and love that others might be able to receive God's love through us - even in the difficulties of a pandemic, the pains of kidney stones, and the death of loved ones.

After having looked at Mary's journey to Christmas from Nazareth, Elizabeth's journey from Judea to Christmas, and Joseph's journey from Bethlehem to Christmas, we turn today to the journey God calls US to make to Christmas from a place we might call "*Covidia*." "*Covidia*" is, of course, not a real place. It is a symbol of the Christmas invitation to journey with God out of whatever difficulties we might be experiencing to the hope, peace, joy, and love God offers to all who are willing to follow Him.

That is because the process of salvation is not meant just to take us to heaven when we die. The process of salvation is also meant to change our present lives. Which is why the Child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate grew up to tell those who were experiencing pain, sorrow, and loss that "*I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly*." To see this, let's turn to Luke 2, the very heart of the Christmas story.

Luke begins with the well known statement: "*in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world . . . and everyone went to his own town to register*." Then Luke makes a statement that contains a piece of information that often gets glossed

over; he says Joseph “*went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.*” To see the meaning in that piece of often glossed over information, we need to recall what we have already heard in the different parts of the Christmas story.

The first week we were told that the angel Gabriel told Mary “*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*” The second week we were told that in response (to that announcement and the news that Elizabeth was pregnant) Mary “*hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.*” And then last week, we were told “*an angel of the Lord*” told Joseph “*do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,*” and how in response, Joseph “*took Mary home as his wife.*” Which is where we find the meaning of that piece of glossed over information.

That is because when Joseph “*took Mary home as his wife*” he should (according to the custom of the day) have taken her to the extra room he had been building on his father Jacob’s home in Bethlehem. But that is not what he did. Joseph took Mary back to Nazareth. We know this because Luke tells us in today’s reading that when the census was announced “*Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem.*” As we ponder this piece of often glossed over information, we need to ask ourselves what was happening. That is because it is more than just a bit of Bible trivia - telling us who went where when. It actually gives us the first step we need to make in our journey from “Covidia” to Christmas.

That first step is this: WE MUST TRUST THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN. Note I said TRUST and not KNOW or BELIEVE. Christians know and believe that God is sovereign. That is because we know and believe Proverbs 19:2, which says “*many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.*” It is because we know and believe Psalm 103:19, which says “*the Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*” And it is because we know and believe 1Timothy 6:15, which says that God is “*the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.*” We just don’t always TRUST in what we know and believe. We see this in the statement “*all too many people who pray ‘Our Father’ on Sunday act like spiritual orphans come Monday.*” The reason is simple

We don’t always trust that God is sovereign. We know and believe that nothing that happens in life can occur without God directly causing it to happen or allowing it to happen. We know and believe that no evil can come upon us that God is unable to prevent. And we know and believe that no matter what difficulties befall us God can deliver us. But when difficulties show up on OUR doorstep, it is still all too easy to fail to TRUST that God is allowing whatever is happening as part of his plans for US. We see the call to do so however in Romans where Paul wrote “*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*”

As we ponder this piece of often glossed over information, we can also see a second step we need to make in our journey from “Covidia” to Christmas. That second step is this: WE MUST TRUST THAT GOD’S TIMING IS ALWAYS PERFECT. That is because in our fallen and sinful state it

is hard for us to always see the perfection in God's timing. We typically have ideas about what should happen in our lives. We then develop opinions about how - and when - those things should happen. And then we become frustrated when God does not act according to our timetable. For we do not truly TRUST that God's timing is always perfect.

Joseph probably didn't. He probably grumbled all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem about how *"this is not the time for God to be allowing this to happen."* And then when *"the time came for the baby to be born"* IN BETHLEHEM, and not after they returned to Nazareth, Joseph probably became even more indignant with God that *"this is not the time for this to happen."* But, as we know, it was.

So, two easy steps: TRUST that God is sovereign and TRUST that God's timing is always perfect. Or at least they would be easy steps if we not only knew and believed but also trusted a third thing we see in this often overlooked piece of information. And that third thing is this: GOD LOVES US. God loves us unconditionally. God loves us without us having to earn His care. God loves us without us having make ourselves presentable.

That is because God sees us as His children, even though we fail to trust that He is sovereign and His timing is always perfect. For He not only created us, He did so with the intent of being in relationship with us, and with the plan that we would help Him be in relationship with all His creation. And we see this in this simple statement in today's reading: *"while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."*

This verse tells us that God showed His love for us by entering the world in less than admirable circumstances. It tells us He showed His love for us at what Joseph and Mary probably felt was the wrong time and place. And it tells us He showed His love for us through a young couple who were not special, even if they were descendants of David. That is because God has a way of upending our apple carts to bring about His will in our lives. God has a way of redirecting our *"best laid plans"* to bring about HIS perfect will for us. And God has a ways of overcoming our *"winter of discontent"* despite our most furtive efforts to hold onto our bitterness.

That is because God is sovereign and His timing is always perfect. He knows what we need and when we need it. He knows what is best for us even when we have other ideas. And He knows what we need not just to experience *"abundant life"* in this world but *"eternal life"* in the world to come. All we have to do is TRUST that what we know and believe is true. And if we do, we will be able to make the journey from *"Covidia"* to Christmas again and again and again.

We see what happens when we don't trust that God is sovereign and His timing is perfect in the story of a young man who was graduating high school. As that day approached, his father took him around to car lots to find the perfect vehicle as a graduation present. After the graduation ceremony, the family gathered at their home to celebrate. As they ate and laughed, the father handed the young man a box. It contained a Bible with the statement *"Remember Matthew 7:11, Love Dad"* in his father's handwriting inside the cover. Thinking his father had gone back on his promise, the young

man slammed the Bible down on the kitchen table, and stormed out.

Over the years, the father tried to contact the son again and again. But he would never respond. Eventually, he received news that his father had died. Full of emotion, he finally returned home. Entering the house for the first time in 30 years, he looked around for the things he needed to settle the estate. Then he saw it. On the kitchen table, right where he had slammed it down so many years before, was the Bible. He picked it up. As he did so, he noticed a piece of paper protruding from it. When he opened the Bible to that page, he saw two things.

First, he saw that the piece of paper was a check. It was dated to the day of his graduation, and was made out to the car dealer where he had found the car he wanted. Second, he saw that the check was inserted as a bookmark in the 7th chapter of Matthew. And underlined in that chapter was Matthew 7:11. It said *“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”*

If you want to make the journey from “Covidia” to Christmas, I invite you to do two things. First, I invite you to TRUST THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN. Second, I invite you to TRUST THAT GOD’S TIMING IS ALWAYS PERFECT. And I do so because GOD LOVES YOU. God loves you unconditionally. God loves you without you having to earn His care. And God loves you without you having to make yourself presentable. That is because God sees you as His child, even though you sometimes fail to trust that He is sovereign and His timing is always perfect.

So, make the choice today to make the journey once again from “Covidia” to Christmas. Make the choice to experience anew the hope, peace, joy and love that God offers you in the Christmas story. And make the choice to invite others in joining you on the journey from “Covidia” to Christmas - not only on December 25th, but every day of every year.