

12-24-08 - - Christmas Eve Service – 5:00 PM

Church of the Nazarene – Patchogue, NY

God's Perfect Plan – Luke 2:1-20

Tonight I want to tell a story rather than bombard you with Scripture and teaching . . . And everyone said ... AMEN! The Christmas story is so universally known that we often gloss over it without thinking much about it. I hope to look at this common story from a slightly different perspective tonight. We'll get to our main text in a few minutes.

Mary and Joseph, our main couple – are ordinary Jewish people in an ordinary town doing ordinary things – kind of like you and me – right? I mean - two young people in love and planning out their wedding. Actually, Joseph was probably much older than Mary – She was in her teens. Get your mind around that for starters . . . this was a different culture for sure. Imagine your daughter – say 13 – 15 yrs old – planning to marry an older twenty-something year old man from the poorer side of town. She says, “But we're in love,” and you say, “I don't care – NO!” Things were different then - let it go – Just stay with me here!

OK – so here's our young couple – planning their wedding and diligently following the ways of God the best they understood how. At this time in history, every young Jewish girl, who knows the Scriptures, wanted to be chosen by God to bare the Messiah of Israel, but it had been hundreds of years since the prophecies and nothing happened yet. Isaiah had predicted – ***“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Is. 7:14 - NIV)***. Many had abandoned this possibility, but some (Mary) remained faithful in prayer for this miracle to happen to them.

Be careful what you pray for – you might actually get it! ☺

In the midst of their wedding plans, God comes along and messes everything up for them ...

At the moment the angel Gabriel visited Mary, I'm sure she was in awe and thought nothing better could possibly happen to her. She would be the favored one of Israel, the one out of many who would give birth to the Messiah. What could be better than this? How special – How privileged – How wonderful! She was walking on air – on cloud nine. It must have been the best day of her life. What could possible go wrong now?

Then reality started to set in . . . How will she tell Joseph she's pregnant when they both know it's not by him? Oh yeah – then there's that little law in their culture that says that anyone found pregnant before marriage could be stoned to death! (Wow! Imagine if we still had that law in effect today in our culture?) What would Joseph think – How would he react? Would he understand what the angel told her? Would he turn her in? Would he believe her, or would he have her stoned? How could she bare this special child if she were stoned to death? WAIT – If this is really from God, He will have to make a way and protect her and the baby she would bare. I wonder how long she took to tell him.

God had the perfect plan in mind. He thinks of everything. Joseph dreamt about the situation – probably perplexed about everything on his mind. An angel told him in a dream that this situation is from God and he should not FREAK OUT. He should continue the wedding plans and don't doubt or mistrust Mary. So he did ... he didn't question the dream or its meaning – he just obeyed God – hmmm. Do we react to what our piers say and what the local buzz tells us, or do we obey what we have heard from God by prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Now fast forward about nine months ... This brings us to our text passage for tonight.

READ Luke 2:1-20 (NLT) ...

We always read all the splendor and awe into this story – every year at least, but what about the reality side? I think that was part of it all too. Like, what about morning sickness and Mary's body being stretched out by this life growing inside her? So nine long months passed by without issue or mention in the Bible.

So let's put this all into perspective... Mary is just about ripe and we all know how that last month of pregnancy is for both the man and the woman. Let us also keep in mind that she has been chosen by God to bare His Messiah. She knew it – back then – nine months ago - with the glory of an angel appearing to her, but what about now? Nine months and lots of stress, ridicule, and accusations have passed. It's a good thing Joseph had that dream and is on-board with all this. At this point, I'm thinking the last thing Mary wanted was a major disruption in her life and routine – BUT – **God had a plan** for them...

A census is called for by the governor of their area. Everyone had to return to their place of origin and sign in as a resident. There was no Internet then – no phones – no mail or any way to register remotely. They would have to go there personally, physically and be counted for by registering in Bethlehem. Both Joseph and Mary were from the city of Bethlehem and of the family and line of David – So Jesus was descended from the line of David. Joseph and Mary had to travel some 70+ miles to Bethlehem with Mary nine months pregnant and ready to pop at any time.

They moved forward not by faith or divine revelation, but by the natural happenings of their environment – a census would make them go to a particular place at this particular time in history. It was the leading behind the scenes by the Holy Spirit of God beyond their cognizance or physical consciousness. God had a plan and He was working this plan out in their lives and circumstances without their knowledge (fulfilling prophecy). In fact, for them, things were going from bad to worse. They were forced to make a long trip - with Mary very pregnant. They were moving in obedience to the ordinances of the land - not by choice. They were going about life as usual for their society and time. Did you ever make a long trip with a very pregnant woman? – It ain't fun! The complaining – being uncomfortable all the time – having “agida” all the time no matter what she eats – and what about the hundreds of bathroom breaks they would have to make on this journey?

When they finally arrived, they couldn't get a room in any local inn. What kind of special treatment was God providing for this anointed couple? They would have to rough it in a stable with the animals for one night. How bad could it be? They would register and get out of there as soon as possible. Well – just when they thought it couldn't get any worse ... YEP – she goes into labor out in the middle of nowhere – in a stable – in the night – in the stink and noise of animals. How disgusting is that? How highly favored by God was she? Once they got passed the smell and the filth, maybe it wasn't a terrible place, but it was still a stable. But - when you're in labor and ready to deliver, all sense of surroundings and dignity, pride, and vanity fade away – so Mary delivered her special baby boy in this stable.

But now What? Well, it wasn't home or even a nice place, so where could she put him for the night? There's a feeding trough there and the animals are finished eating by this time. Maybe if she wraps him in enough strips of cloth, the animal spit and germs won't reach His tender new-born skin. How could God allow such a horrible thing happen to them? Maybe Mary heard wrong that night nine months ago. Was that really an angel who brought the news of this glorious event that would happen to her? This just was NOT how she imagined it would happen at all. What kind of bizarre unbelievable occurrence was this? What baby would be put in a manger? What new-born would be wrapped in strips of cloth? BUT – **God had a plan!** His plan was perfect...

This whole set of seemingly bad circumstances set the stage for God's perfect plan to unfold ... Let's look at our text again – verses 11-12 from the New Living Translation ... An angel appeared to shepherds and said:

“The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the LORD – has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David. And this is how you will recognize Him: You will find a baby lying in a manger, wrapped in strips of cloth!” WHAT?

The angel told the shepherds something very specific. Of all the babies possibly born at that time and in that area, how would they know for sure that they found the right one? It sounded far-fetched and unbelievable, but they obeyed and went to find everything exactly as the angel had said. A new-born baby lying in a feeding trough and wrapped in strips of cloth. As crazy as it sounded, there HE was. They found the Christ – the Son of the Living God – the Messiah – the Savior – Jesus! This caused such excitement within them that they went about telling everyone about this great event from God.

God had a plan – a perfect plan. It might not have seemed like it at the time to Joseph and Mary, but His perfect plan extended far beyond their limited view. **God's perfect plan was for all people** everywhere and for you and me today too.

If they had focused only on their circumstances, this young couple might feel things weren't going well for them at all. They might even feel abandoned by God. Did you ever feel that way? What circumstances are you going through right now? What are you dealing with that you just didn't expect from God? What might seem to be going wrong in your life when you started out following a promise you believed was from God? I can relate – can any of you? Could God be moving you into position to be used in a special way for Him? Maybe your seemingly negative situation will become a source of blessing to others you are not even aware of yet. God doesn't make mistakes! Let me say that again, God doesn't make mistakes! **If** you have yielded your heart and life to Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, your Savior, then **God has a plan** for you! Actually, He has a plan for Him that involves you!

You could be right where you need to be for Him right now – no matter what it seems like to you. Your prayers are being answered even if it seems like you are seeing the opposite!

Rom. 8:28 – “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the GOOD of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.” (NLT).

God had a perfect plan for Mary and Joseph. It was a plan that extended far beyond what they could understand, but He caused His plan to take place exactly as it had to in order to fulfill His promise. He led a young couple to have to go outside their comfort zone and make a trip to a distant land while she was nine months pregnant in order to set the stage to fulfill prophecy that the child would be born in Bethlehem. ***Micah 5:2 – “But you, Bethlehem Ephrata, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be ruler over Israel, from ancient times.”*** Jesus was born exactly as it was prophesied about the Messiah. God orchestrated His plan in the lives and circumstances of Mary and Joseph so that everything would be done exactly as He promised. He arranged their circumstances in such a unique way that no other child could be the ONE that night.

Yes – and God has a plan for you! Will you trust Him with your life and circumstances tonight and be a part of **God's perfect plan**? He takes the time to orchestrate the most intimate details in our lives so that His perfect plan may be accomplished and uses us to affect the lives of others. However, He chooses to work within the allowances we afford Him. We can accept His Lordship in our lives and know by faith that He will work all things out for our good and for the good of the kingdom of God, or we can say No thanks – I think I would rather be in complete control of my own life. No one can answer for you. The choice is always yours alone. God gave you free will to choose either way. I just know that He desires you to yield to **God's Perfect Plan**.

Would you accept the Christmas gift from God Almighty that He gave on that first Christmas night and that He continues to make available every day since? “For God so loved the world that He GAVE His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have Eternal Life.” (John 3:16).