

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**Pastor David Woolverton**

Grace and peace to you. In the name of God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. It's good to be here with you and to share the word of the Lord with you today! For those of you who are joining us for the first time online or here in person, my name is David Woolverton and I'm one of the pastors here. And it's a real privilege for us to be together this Advent season, anticipating what God has in mind for us. We began a new message series last week for Advent called Radical Hospitality, and last week we looked specifically at Mary. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her encounter with the Angel Gabriel, a supernatural moment of an interruption in her life that would forever change not only her life, but every life that would come for generations from that point forward, including our lives. And I never underestimate what God can do through one individual, through one moment in time. And that's really what we're going to focus in on throughout this series. Radical hospitality, radical hospitality. And today we're going to take a little different perspective. We're going to take the perspective of another of the main characters, Joseph, and what does he have to do with radical hospitality?

As we prepare our hearts, would you join with me once more in prayer? Gracious Lord, open us up to your word. And open your word up to us. Teach us, Father, what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this, Father, I pray in Jesus mighty name. And all God's people said. Amen.

Well, last week I shared with you that that Kristine and I are not unaccustomed to visiting hotels and beds and breakfasts when we travel or when I'm going on business trips or things like that. And more recently, as my mom has been dealing with cancer treatments, I've found myself going to New Jersey and spending chunks of time with them, making sure everything is okay with them. And so more recently, I've stayed in a hotel because they now have a guest in their home who is a 24-7 live in caregiver. So being in a hotel while I'm also working, my work shift shifts to the later parts of night has really changed my perspective on a few things about hotels.

Last week I shared with you some of the signage that I saw in the room as I prepared my heart around a message of hospitality. Today, I want to share with you another sign that was in that hotel room, a sign that you've probably have seen. And maybe, if you're a rare individual, you've read all the details of this kind of sign. These are the signs that are on the inside, the room side, of the door of your hotel room. You know, they're the ones that have the title, How to Respond in the Event of a Fire or Emergency. Anybody here actually read those signs? Ok, there are a couple who do. Well, I took a picture of one. And I want to share with you what it says, bear with me. There's a reason why I'm doing this. It says, A guide to hotel fire safety. And then it says, Preplan your escape route. Preplan. And this is how it's all laid out. As soon as you check in, begin to plan your escape in case of fire when you get to your room. Take a few moments to locate escape routes, walk down the corridor and find the nearest alternate exit or exit stairways. Count the doorways, turns, and well as bends in the corridors and any other features between your room and the exits. Find the nearest fire alarm. Most frequently it will be located near the exit or stairwell door. Read the instructions on how to use it. Read the emergency evacuation instructions posted on the inside of your suite or bedroom door (which is redundant because that's what you're reading.) If a fire begins in your room, leave your room and close the door behind you to keep smoke and flames out of the corridor. Sound the alarm, leave the building by the nearest exit - do not use elevators. If you hear the alarm, should the alarm sound, do not telephone the hotel operator or the front desk. Leave the building through the nearest safe exit. If there is evidence of smoke in the room, roll out of bed and crawl on the floor. Do not stand. Smoke and deadly gases rise. Go to the door of your room, feel the door handle with your hand. The doors are insulated, and you may not detect heat on the other side if you feel the door. If the door handle is hot, do not open the door. If the door handle is not hot, open it slowly, but be ready to close it immediately if necessary. Check the hall. If you can leave safely, take your room key with you and close the door behind you. Go to the nearest safe exit. Proceed with care down to the ground level. Hold the handrail for stability. If the nearest exits are blocked, return to your room and close the door. Now would be a good time to telephone the hotel switchboard by dialing zero on the telephone. Do not use elevators. What to do in the room if the room door is hot or there is a fire or dense smoke in the hall. Please remember, few people burn to death in fires. Most fatalities come from smoke inhalation. Avoiding excessive exposure to smoke should be a paramount concern during a fire. It may be safer in your room. Here are some things you should do. Let someone know you are in the room if the phone works. Phone the switchboard by dialing zero. Wet towels, sheets or other cloth items and put them around the doors to prevent smoke from coming in. Fill the bathtub. Use the ice bucket to keep the towels wet around doors. Do not break windows unless the smoke in your room is getting heavy. Open or broken windows will draw the fire in your direction. Hang a sheet or other visible item from the outside of the window to signal the fire department. (How you supposed to do that without opening the window, is not explained.) And then it says at the very bottom of the sheet. Always remember, do not panic! Please remain calm and enjoy your stay.

We all define radical hospitality in very unique ways. Hold on to those thoughts for just a brief moment. I'm going to come back to that.

Last week when we looked at Mary and Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, we talked about how the angel was inviting her to see herself as a God-bearer. And then we reflected on what that meant for us to be God bearers, too. In today's world, what does it mean for us to bear Jesus in a world that's in desperate need of hope and new life? What would it look like for us to ambassador that hope by being God bearers? What we also learned last week was that God had an actual process in mind. God first announced favor. That's God's right, it’s called grace. God bestows favor on us when we don't deserve it or when we least expect it. That's the whole definition of grace. God is gifting that favor to us. He always gives that favor to us in anticipation of what comes next, usually an invitation. He invited Mary to experience life from a whole different perspective than whatever she had imagined. This perspective, this invitation was to a mission and to see her life as bigger than herself, to see her partnership with God as advancing a mission that would change the trajectory of the world. And that invitation led to God overshadowing. We looked at that phrase. The Holy Spirit would overshadow Mary, and Mary would become miraculously pregnant. But when we look at the true nature of overshadowing, the baby, we discovered, the baby in Mary would be more important than Mary's life. And God overshadows us with what He births through us. And whenever God bestows favor and invites us to be a part of a greater mission and then overshadows us and makes that mission more important than our life, he then sends us out into the world to bear witness, to bear Jesus into that world. That's what we all learned last week.

So, let's now take all those principles and apply them to the other major character in this Christmas story, Joseph. So, I invite you to turn with me in your Bible or in your Bible app, and we are going to put these words on the screen as well. I invite you to follow along and to listen as God speaks, perhaps in the midst of a story that you've heard many, many times. Let's ask God to open us up to a deeper and richer understanding of radical hospitality in the midst of Joseph's story.

I’m going to start in Matthew 1:18 and I'm using the new century version translation. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. Mary, was engaged to marry Joseph, but before they married, she learned that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because Mary's husband, Joseph, was a good man, he did not want to disgrace her in public. So, he planned to divorce her secretly. He had an exit plan. In verse 20, while Joseph thought about these things, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, “Joseph, descendant of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the baby in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus because He will save people from their sins.” All this happened to bring about what the Lord had said through the Prophet. The Virgin will be pregnant, she will have a son, and they will name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us”. When Joseph woke up, he did what the Lord's angel had told him to do. Joseph took Mary as his wife, but he did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son, and Joseph named him Jesus.

We may know the story, we may have heard that story many times over. I know I have. And as I was reading through this in anticipation of preaching this series, it dawned on me that Joseph was a man who was invited into offering radical hospitality. And what this passage of Scripture began to teach me, personally, is that the power behind radical hospitality is found in a single word - sacrifice. Sacrifice. In fact, you can't have radical hospitality without sacrifice. Now, the word sacrifice is actually a very interesting word. In our culture today, we have certain understandings or definitions of what sacrifice means. We often think about sacrifice as giving something up, giving it up. Sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly. It's a sacrifice that's being asked of us. What it really meant to me is that I had to change my own perspective of what sacrifice was all about. Rather than being a word that's associated with subtraction, I really think that sacrifice is an addition word. Fundamentally, sacrifice is not about giving up something, I believe it's rather about giving toward something, or someone. Genuine sacrifice is about giving toward something that is bigger than us. Something that we value more than ourselves, that we would let go of whatever it is that needs to be let go of in order to advance something more. In fact, sacrifice itself is about advancing a cause that's greater than oneself and doing whatever it takes to make it happen. Can you get that picture of what sacrifice looks like? Can you imagine what sacrifice feels like? It's not my natural understanding of what sacrifice is, especially in our culture today. In our culture, today sacrifices, especially the unwilling sacrifices, are things that we must give up in order to compromise, accommodate. But what if we reframed what sacrifice is all about? About an investment, a giving towards something that is greater, larger or more important than ourselves, our own life.

That made me think, in this context of the Christmas story, what did Joseph of sacrifice for Mary, for Jesus, for the baby that was yet to be born? What did he sacrifice for God? What did he sacrifice for the world's future? In other words, what did he give up versus what did he give toward? I found that to be a very interesting question. I started to create a list, and that list began with his reputation. One of the things that Joseph had to sacrifice was his reputation within the community in which he lived. So, the girl that he is betrothed to, it comes out that she's pregnant and he's not the father. What will people think? What will people talk about? And they will talk about it… Why? Because not much has changed in the human condition over the years. What will happen within the faith community of Judaism when they discover that this faithful Jewish man who's been a part of the synagogue, part of the Jewish faith community for so long, now his girlfriend is pregnant. The angel said, “Hey, Joe. God's doing a new thing. Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife because the baby that's inside of her, the baby she's going to give birth to, this is God's doing.” Suddenly giving something up took on a larger context. Somehow, sacrifice took on a bigger picture and Joseph was being invited into that bigger picture. He had to sacrifice his reputation. He also had to sacrifice his dreams of love and marriage, at least on the surface, at least in the front end of things. Now, he's a young guy, most likely, and back then in first century Judaism, weddings were a big deal. Today, weddings are a big deal for the brides, and perhaps the grooms. I've been doing weddings for 35 plus years now and I have heard this so many times. The guys, the grooms, saying “You tell me where, you tell me when and I'll show up. I'll be there.” And it's up to the bride and the bride's mother or family to deal with all the ramifications of the plans. That's the way it goes, right? Well, back in the first century, Jewish rituals of marriage were a lot more extensive. In fact, weddings back in those days were major, multiday events. Both parties, the groom's family, and the bride's family, they worked together to make these events as spectacular as they needed to be. If you want a glimpse at a wedding, look at the wedding at Cana and Galilee in John, Chapter two. They ran out of wine. We don't know if that was just because they were imbibing for a couple of hours at the inn, on the dance floor in front of the band. We don't know if it was an open bar, and they just went hog wild with the drinking. Most likely, they were on day two of a three-day event and they were out of wine already. Marriage was a big deal. And Joseph's dreams of what that marriage ceremony would be and what the wedding feast was going to be, and all the events related to that were all something he had to sacrifice. Because it was not going to play out the way it was supposed to. He was giving toward something new, something that only God could do, and something that God was inviting him to be a part of. Joseph also had to sacrifice plans for a normal life. Granted, it's something that we see in culture all the time now that couples have kids before they're married. So being a being a dad prematurely, maybe that wasn't in his plans, but, you know, it happens. Could he adjust? As long as he could live with the reputation issue, as long as he could live with the change in plans, he could make this work. But, this kid, this kid was different than any other kid. I know most parents say that, right? My kid is special! Well, Joseph was facing into a message that an angel told him, that this baby was going to partner with the transition of all humanity from that moment on. So, the mission set him apart. It wasn't just Mary who knew the story behind the story. Joseph knew it too, and he was being invited to partner with Mary and with the Holy Spirit to raise a child who would go on to save humanity from their sins. How do you put that on a resume? He had to sacrifice a normal life. Did it radically change how he raised Jesus? Probably not. He still taught Jesus at least one trade, the trade of a masonry or a carpenter. And that trade would seal the deal for how Jesus would prepare himself not only to teach, but to face a cross some 30 years later.

 Joseph was sacrificing, giving toward, by giving up a normal life. He also sacrificed his role of being a biological father to Mary's firstborn. Need I go into that? I mean, that in our culture happens periodically. Joseph had to wrap his mind around what this would look like, what it meant, and more importantly, for a guy even in the first century, he had to wrap his mind around sacrificing sex. From the time of the marriage ceremony till the birth of Jesus, that was off limits. Something was brewing. What would God be asking him to give up for the future of humanity? Would we do that? What would it look like if we reframed what sacrifice means when we realize that radical hospitality is rooted in giving toward something or someone that is bigger than us? It can happen when we simply welcome somebody into our life. It can happen when we open our home to somebody who is in need. It can happen in the school cafeteria when we dare to cross that barrier and go sit with somebody who's sitting by themselves because, for whatever reason, they have been alienated or isolated. It happens when we desire to actually protect another person's reputation, even if we don't understand what their behavior means. Radical hospitality means it's not normal, it's above normal.

Mary and Joseph, in their story that we celebrate almost nostalgically every Christmas, had the willingness to view their life as secondary to God's mission. Can you imagine what it would look like if we, all of us, as followers of Jesus, did the same? We suddenly become the church, the Body of Christ. What do you have to sacrifice for God's greater purpose? What is God asking of you as he pours his favor out on you and invites you to view your life from the vantage point of how God sees your life? And then overshadows you making what God is going to birth through you more important than you. He wants us to be God-bearers because he wants to send us into a world that is truly desperate for hope.

There may be a fire going on, and as we enter into the radical hospitality moment, we’ve got to check out our exit strategy. Joseph could have hit the escape button at any moment. Instead, when the dream was over, he got up and as it says, he did what the angel told him to do. If the Holy Spirit has been nudging you from this message or in spite of this message, maybe God's favor is upon you and he's inviting you to change the world?

Let's pray. Father God, I thank you that you call us, even us, to be God-bearers. Lord, what a daunting task to do. Only you, Father, by your Holy Spirit in us, can help us to change our mindset from giving up to giving toward. And every time we do so, you invite us to be God-bears. Lord, pour your Holy Spirit on us so that when we take Jesus out into the world, the world will see Jesus in us. I pray this in His precious name. Amen.