

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Matthew 1:18-25

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Unwrapping Christmas – Unwrapping Technique

There you are Christmas morning surrounded by your family. Someone picks up the gift you know is yours, the one you have been waiting for. It is the perfect size and shape and you open it up. Just then your grandma comments to you, “Save the wrapping paper, don’t rip it.”

I never got it.

Why would you save the wrapping paper? I mean it only fit that box, and it never will fit another one this perfectly. And where does she store her wrapping paper anyway?

Yet if you think about it, it would be so economical, thrifty and environmentally friendly if we re-used our wrapping paper. Carefully removing it from the package would mean less landfill waste and less dollars for next year’s Christmas.

Then there is the other dilemma, Christmas presents or are they Christmas Eve presents? As a child, I think I could have done Christmas Eve presents, but that might have prevented those 5am moments to sneak out and check the presents and see what Santa brought. However, you have to admit getting it all done Christmas Eve is nice, so you can enjoy the presents on Christmas Day.

Unwrapping presents has so much to it, when to open it, how to open it, and all of this present business seems to wrap us up in this season to wondering, “What is the best way to open the gift of Christmas?”

If you were to ask this question in your family at Christmas time, with your extended relatives there, surely you would get an opinion about

how to remove the wrapping paper. One of my favorite bloggers calls the moments during this season with our families the “Final Frontier.”¹ This season is a time of being with these people who have been a part of your life and have helped you find new horizons in your life. Family has many nostalgic qualities that are important during this season and in truth when they are not with us we miss them. However, like the Star Trek final frontier which is exciting and helps us reach farther, they also can push back. Sitting around the dinner tables at family events and talking about anything challenging is the tagline to half the sitcoms, and sketch comedies about this season. Why you ask?

The reality is that our families know us, our faults and failures and our successes. They know where we came from, the messy child who grew into an adult, and let’s be they still see us as children many times even when we have grown up. Families can put us in our place if we are out of line, but sometimes that same role can put us out of the place we find our wholeness or our God given selves in too. They can give us opinions that prevent us from unwrapping Christmas the way we hope to.

Take one of my favorite TV families for example. Jim and Dwight from the office. In this episode Jim plays the everyday prank he always plays on Jim, with a Christmas spirit.

In “The Office,” Jim wraps Dwight’s his office furniture and well, let’s just say the present is not what Dwight expects. Jim is known to play deeper pranks on Dwight all the time, but it seems Dwight fails to re-orient himself to understand what Jim is really doing.

When you arrive in the final episodes of the office what is striking is that Jim plays increasingly audacious pranks on Dwight, but what brings them a lot of happiness is when they respect each

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/glennondoyle>

other for who they really are. I love the office because it shows how the monotony of everyday life sometimes distracts us from seeing the gift the people who sit right next to us each day can be, it provides a different way of looking at the world.

The “Final Frontier” phrasing, the office, and even that bickering about how to unwrap our presents remind us that even in the polarizing environment of our families, that sometimes make us just uncomfortable because it just seems like opposing arguments are taking us toward a fight...God usually slips in to provide another way.

The author of *When God Comes Down*, Jim Harnish describes our biblical character in the Advent story today as being “obedient.” Today is the story of Joseph who is to be Mary’s husband and we know as the father in Jesus’ life. Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25 learns about Mary’s unexpected pregnancy and is going to take an alternative course of action from the law, instead of following through and reporting her infidelity to religious officials that could sentence her to punishment, he is going to dismiss her quietly. Then an angel appears and Joseph listens to the angel and decides to take this child as his own.

Jim Harnish’s description of obedience is something I struggle with. Obedience to me reminds me of the schooling we do to dogs, it is about submissiveness and reducing ourselves to something small. However, Harnish invites us to reconsider what obedience to God means, it is not being small before God, instead the invitation of obedience to God is a “radical reorientation” of our lives. An re-orientation that like Joseph brings us not to the first path or the second path, but to God’s third path in our lives.

I want to take a minute now to share a retelling of Joseph's story that a colleague of mine wrote, in which Joseph writes a letter to Mary describing what happened in this scripture verse today...pay attention for the radical reorientation.²

Dear Mary

I'm sure you figured out by now that I'm not very good at feelings, or talking, or talking about feelings. You know I'm just a carpenter, but still -- lately there are some things that have been weighing heavily on my heart. I can't stop my mind – it keeps turning them over and over in my head. I can't sleep. In fact, I had the strangest dream last night, but I'm getting ahead of myself. I thought that maybe it would be easier if I could tell you these things in a letter.

Lately, when I go into town, you should see how people look at me. It's a look of disapproval and judgment, but it's mixed with something I can only describe as pity. It's a look that says, "Poor Joseph ...". And I hear people talking. I hear the whispers, and I worry for your safety. You know how mean people can be.

Maybe people think I'm stupid – I don't know – but I'm not. I know that you told me the child you carry is God's child – a child of the (God's) spirit. God's child? How can I believe that? I'm not stupid. I can see your growing belly starting to show under your clothes, and if I can see it, so can everybody else. What am I

² Thanks to Brad Walston for this great re-writing in the letter, Brad can be contacted at bwalston81@gmail.com to learn more about his work. I have changed a few lines in here for my own reading.

supposed to think? All I know is that it's not mine -- it could never be.

I thought I knew the people here in Nazareth, but I guess I don't. You should've heard this one guy. He came to the workshop one day as a 'favor' to me, to "have a little talk," and to make sure I knew what the law says . I know what the law says. I know exactly what it says -- I've heard it enough times in the last week: "...they shall bring [you] out to the entrance of [your] father's house and the men of ... town shall stone [you] to death, because [you] committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting [yourself] " (Deuteronomy 22:21) -- God, I hate being (an obedient rule follower) sometimes!

Over the last few weeks, I've done a lot of thinking. Of course, I can't do that whole stoning to death thing. We've known each other too long. My parents and your parents have been friends for years. Remember how we played together by the well when our mothers took us with them to get water? I made fun of your curly hair... Sorry about that. I love your curly hair. I love how that one strand hangs down in your face all the time. I remember how you used to come to the workshop - - you thought I was busy and didn't see you peeking around the corner of the house, watching me work with my father.

I have to tell you that I've grown to care deeply for you. I do love you, Mary. Anyway, I thought a lot about it and I thought it would be best if we just didn't see each other again. My heart breaks fresh all over again every

time I see you. We'll have to make it official and get a real divorce, I think, but I thought it would be best that way. You could go on with your life and then the father of your child could marry you. I prayed that, whoever he is, he would take good care of you; that he would do the right thing. Oh Mary, I prayed so hard -- I prayed that if we just didn't see each other anymore -- ever -- that the people in this stupid town would shut up finally.

I was going to tell you today. That was my final decision -- to quietly divorce you in secret and let you go -- until last night. How can I tell you -- I can't even describe what happened to me last night. I don't know if it was dream or not. I've been so bothered the whole situation that I couldn't sleep. I was tossing and turning and suddenly this man appears out of nowhere. I just about had a heart attack! He was tall and dressed all in white, and he had this kind of weird glow all around him that lit up the room like hundred lamps -- but without the smell. I don't know how, but I knew right away that I was in the presence of an angel. God, I love being obedient rule follower of God sometimes!

So, this angel looks right at me and calls me by name! "Joseph -- son of David," he says. His voice was strong but gentle at the same time. Then he tells me that I shouldn't be afraid to take you as my wife. He said that the child conceived in you is from the Holy Spirit, just like you said. The more I think about it, the more I wonder why I didn't doubt what he said even for a second. He told me that you -- we - were going to have a son and that he is going to save

his people from their sins. I hope that's us! Mary, we have to name him Yeshua – the angel told me so – just like you said the angel told you! You know that means 'salvation,' right?

Oh Mary, I'm sorry I ever doubted you. Somehow by listening to the angel my faith has given me new eyes to see. We must never get divorced. I can't imagine what my life would be like if I never saw you again. Please accept my apology. You have to know that I will do everything in my power to protect and support you -- and our child. I promise.

Mary, last night the angel taught me something very important. I think that sometimes we just have to let go. We have to let go of the 'law.' We have to let go of tradition and fear. We have to let go of what people might be saying about us – whispering behind our backs, judging us. You know, they're going to say that we're crazy – or that I'm crazy anyway -- that I've lost my mind, but I think that what other people say about us is really none of our business anyway. I mean, who do they think they are? As if any of them was without sin... I'd say they should throw the first stone, but they probably would...

The heck with them, I say. Mary, thanks to the angel I'm all yours. I want to let go of all of my doubts and questions. I don't care about my reputation anymore. I belong to you and I belong to our Son, Yeshua. The only reputation I care about is a reputation of being a good, loving husband and provider. Let me love you and support you. I pledge my life to you and our child. I

believe God is clearly in you and in your womb. I believe the holy spirit is growing inside you. Don't you see? God is with us, Mary! You're pregnant with God! We're pregnant with God!

I don't know what we're going to tell our parents. Dad is going to have a fit and my mom is going to cry, of course – you know how she is. Please let me assure your father that I can take care of you, and that it's going to be ok. Better than ok! I'm a good carpenter and I can provide everything you and the baby will ever need. I want to, Mary – and I always will.

I know our marriage was arranged long before we could even walk or talk, but as we grew up together, and played and teased each other, I grew to love you. I believe you, and I believe in you. I just forgot for a while...

You have always been so strong and so thoughtful. You never fell for any of the tricks we tried to play on you when we were kids. The spider in your bed, the toad in the well bucket – they never frightened you.

You forgave me then; can you forgive me now? I believe in you, but more importantly, I trust you. I trust you, and I trust God to do whatever God needs or wants to do with us. I only pray that with your help, I can keep trusting, and letting go -- letting God work -- and I promise I'll do my best to stay out of God's way.

I love you always, and will remain...

Your Joseph, son of Jacob

This is the radical re-orientation that Joseph experienced, if we are open to God this is our invitation in this season too. Jesus birth invites us to unwrap Christmas in a way we never thought of.

In the back of the church we have a camera now and every Sunday we are livestreaming our service on the internet. Some folks think this isn't good because people won't go to church, others think it is great because people can connect who can't make it to church. Let me share a story about where I have seen God unwrap the "Why livestream worship in another way?"

At the church I served previously we had been doing radio broadcasts of the service for years, but the cost of radio was going to quadruple, so we went to an alternative of livestream. I thought we might see some new engagement, but I never imagined it would lead to new ministry in the way it did.

Upon starting I was contacted by a man I knew, because I had grown up with his wife. We were connected as family friends, but hadn't really ever been able to connect. He shared with me that he was watching with his family the livestream each week. Then he shared that due to social anxiety he really had never felt comfortable or close to God in worship, but had felt a strong call to the church and Christianity. He asked to meet with me in person.

As I talked with this young man he shared with me his desire to be baptized and in the next breath a desire to be baptized the same day we baptized his son. However, there was a problem due to his social anxiety he did not want to be baptized in our worship service.

Not many people know this, but a part of our church rules, our United Methodist polity is that we are called to baptize people in the community. This means I as a pastor have an obligation to do baptisms in the church in front of the worshipping community as an act of reminding everyone, congregation and the baptizee, that the Christian life is about supporting one another in our search of living a Godly life and following Jesus. This means the request this man was about to make of me was not what we as Methodists do, we don't do private baptisms.

He asked the question, "Can we do a private baptism?" All my training said, "No!" However out of my mouth came, "Let me imagine what this could look like." After some conversation we decided we hold a baptism after church on a Sunday, and my favorite part was that he would skype or video call in his community of people from across the North American continent, sisters in other states, friends in Canada, and the immediate family in the town we were in.

On a Sunday afternoon, we gathered a small congregation in person and on screens and we baptized this man and his young son. The best part of the story is this man became a great support for me in my life, and is someone I consider to be seeking to live out the ways of Jesus in his life.

Obedience to God, is a radical reorientation it helps us find the new ways to unwrap Christmas, ways that we could never have imagined on our own...ways that let Jesus show up in our lives.

This week I invite you to go home, find a scrap of wrapping paper and write on it one way you will search for God in the coming year. Choose a way for yourself that opens you to the "radical

reorientation” God might be calling you to. Maybe you want to listen to a child or friend differently to change a relationship, maybe you want to be in prayer more regular, or maybe it is just writing “be open to God’s ways.” Stick that piece of wrapping paper in one of your Christmas decoration boxes and when you find it next year, see what God did in your life.

May we never be happy with two options to unwrap Christmas, may we always search for God’s way, and may you this season find new ways to unwrap this life of Christianity, that we may be surprised by the Christ child once again.