

Sermon
3 January 2016
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Matthew 2:19-23

Who only reads the first chapter of a book? Definitely not me!
Especially if it's a good story, once I've started, I can't stop. I'll happily
lose sleep to find out what happens at the end. And I'm sure that I am
not alone in that...

During Advent, we've read the first chapter of the life story of Jesus, but
we are nowhere near "and they all lived happily ever after" yet. The
beautiful baby boy born in a stable in Bethlehem is just the *beginning* of
the story.

What happened next?

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream – as was the
custom by now! – and told him to pack up their belongings and flee to
Egypt, because Herod wanted to get rid of baby Jesus. And without any
hesitation Joseph did as he was told.

They stayed in Egypt until Herod died, and then again an angel of the
Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to go home, to go to
Israel. Once again Joseph obeyed and took his family to *Nazareth*, that

insignificant, unknown wee town in the district of Galilee, where they came from.

After all the hype and excitement of Bethlehem – back to Nazareth, back to normal.

And that is where we all are today as well – after all the hype and excitement of Christmas, we now find ourselves in the new year. No gifts under our Christmas trees anymore, no threatening our kids with the good-list anymore, visiting family gone home and festive food all finished... So what next?

Back to Nazareth, back to normal. But what is normal?

Mary and Joseph had NO idea how their lives were going to turn out! A young carpenter, ordinary guy, probably in big trouble because he's not been pulling his weight at the family business as he was supposed to, married to an innocent young girl, with a brand new baby boy – a baby who was going to grow up to save the whole world from their sins!

Nothing “normal” about their situation. But Joseph knew the recipe for success, because he was obedient to God. If God spoke, he listened. Straight away, without asking questions, without weighing pro's and con's up against each other. If God told him in a dream: “Take your family and go”, he was on his way with his family before the sun came up.

Although he had no idea what was lying ahead of him, Joseph just wanted to keep his family safe, as was any man's main priority in those

days. And he knew that the safest place to be is *where God leads you* – wherever that might be. Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth... As long as he was going where God wanted him to be, he knew he would be where he was supposed to be and that things would work out well. And he was right.

And exactly the same thing is true for us as well. 3 days ago we started a new chapter in our lives, we entered the year 2016. We've got no idea what this year has in store for us, but there is one thing we can know for sure – if we just go where God tells us to go, we'll be fine.

If we listen to God's voice and follow his instructions, we'll have a good year. But a "good year" doesn't necessarily imply that we won't face any hardship. The roads God sends us on are sometimes easy to tread, but sometimes very difficult. There will be ups and downs, smooth ground and rocky roads, but as long as we are going where God wants us to go, we'll be able to cope just fine.

Just like Joseph and Mary did.

I mean, they never planned on becoming the earthly parents of the Saviour of the world! But when God said he wanted to use them, they said "YES SIR"!

They probably planned to get married, wait a wee while before they started with a family and then to lead a quiet life with the rest of their extended family in the then unknown village of Nazareth, a happy wee family nobody would remember in years to come – and look how that turned out for them!

But with all the heartache and pain that came with being parents to a son who had a difficult life and a terrible death, I'm sure that neither Joseph nor Mary would want it any other way, because to be used by God like they were, is a privilege beyond comprehension...

Their lives might not have been what they expected at all, but their lives were amazing. Their lives might have been hard, but at the same time their lives were extraordinary, unforgettable, mind-blowing!

They had no idea what lay ahead of them, but they had what they needed to make a success of their journey – they had faith, hope and love. And to be honest: What more do you need?

On Boxing Day we had South-African friends over for a post-Christmas dinner. The table was set nicely, and one of the guys lifted up his desert spoon and said: I love the sight of a desert spoon, because to me that is a sign of hope, a promise that something sweet is soon to come.

And I think that with those words he gave all of us the recipe for a successful new year – a spoonful of hope stirred into a life of faith, sprinkled with love...

You don't know what it's going to be, but you do know that it's going to be good, that it's going to end well. That's what the desert spoon tells you about your meal.

And that's what the birth of Jesus tells you about your future.

We might not know what lies ahead of us. Going back to normal might imply for some going back to empty days, lonely nights, worries without cease, ill health, sadness... But what we *do* know is that if God is on this journey with us, we'll end up where we are supposed to be, we'll have the strength to face adversities, and the courage to make the most of every day.

So let's be thankful for the times the road is smooth and we can celebrate and laugh and love and enjoy; and let's be hopeful when the road is rough – because Jesus was born, and that was just the beginning of the story.

Because of what happened that very first Christmas, there is a 'happily ever after' in store for all of us.

So when the plate life dishes up to you this year seems to be filled with nothing but Brussels sprouts, just focus on that dessert spoon...

On the promise that in God there is a hope that transcends *everything*.

As we return from Bethlehem to Nazareth this morning, from all the excitement of Christmas back to normal – let's follow the road God wants us to take, because although we don't know *exactly* where we are going to end up, at least we'll know that with God by our side, it will be a journey worth travelling!

Amen