**December 22, 2019**

**The Rev. Barry P. Kubler**

**St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Plant City, Fl.**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**Matthew 1: 18-25**

**In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!**

 **Let me begin this morning by asking you a question. Is there anyone here, (with the possible exception of little Wesley Daniel,) who has gone through life without ever having encountered some sort of crisis? My educated guess would be that the answer to that question is a ‘no.’**

 **The simple truth, my brothers and sisters, is that we live in an imperfect world. None of us can avoid the crisis’ that will inevitably arise in our lives. All of us will encounter difficulties of varying degrees as we journey through life. It’s quite possible that someone you may have known for years, who always appears to be upbeat and on top of the world, is in fact hiding from the reality of a significant financial, emotional, or spiritual crisis in their life.**

 **Take, for example, a person who appears to be very successful in business. Every decision they’ve made seems to turn to gold. They wear the nicest clothes, live in the nicest house, always have a warm smile, a firm handshake, and a confident voice. Yet, if we were to look beyond the outward appearance of that person’s life, we may find that their life is in a shambles, and not nearly as successful as it seems.**

 **Get to know the person and you may find out that there has been, or continues to be, some crisis in their life. Perhaps they had an early failure in their business life, or a broken marriage. Maybe they’ve had to deal with a financial disaster, are struggling with some sort of personal relationship, or are themselves, or know someone who is, faced with physical or emotional challenges in their day-to-day living. Or, perhaps they are feeling overwhelmed by the competitiveness of life, with the aging process, are bored with their work, or even with their life at home.**

 **My friends, appearances can be deceiving. Even the successful, the self-assured, and the attractive person, has his or her burdens to bear. None of us can avoid the inevitable crisis. All of us have encountered, or will encounter, some trouble over the course of our lives.**

 **Because that is so, we eventually look around us, either purposely, or in some Aha moment, and ask ourselves why it is that some people seem to handle life’s challenges better than others. Why is it that some people seem to find in the darkest parts of their life something worthwhile, something that provides them with the courage and the ability to move on with a renewed sense of commitment and purpose.**

 **Well, since I asked the question, let me tell you that I believe one of the answers to that question comes to us from the Gospel story of the annunciation. And I’m not speaking about the one where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary with a message that she will become pregnant through the action of the Holy Spirit. I mean the one we just heard in our Gospel for today. The annunciation to Joseph, Mary’s betrothed, and soon to be husband.**

 **Before he ever arrives at Jesus’ birthplace in Bethlehem, Joseph appears to be an idealistic man. He has found the woman of his dreams, his life’s partner. He looks forward to settling down, starting his own business as a skilled craftsman, and raising a family. Yet, in the blink of an eye, his world seems to have been turned upside down. An unexpected crisis has arisen in his life. It has been revealed to Joseph that Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant, and Joseph knows he is not the father. Naturally, he feels humiliated, betrayed, and rejected. As he considers his options under Jewish law, Joseph decides that his engagement to Mary must end, along with all the hopes and dreams he had for their life together.**

 **Yet, Joseph is not only an honest, hard working man, he is also a compassionate one. He decides to end the engagement with Mary as quietly as possible, rather than subject Mary, and their families, to unnecessary public disgrace and grief. Understandably, Joseph is heartbroken. It appears that nothing is to come of his love for Mary. She, and her unborn child, will have an uncertain future, and Joseph no longer looks forward to whatever future might await him. Joseph finds himself lying awake at night, pondering the misfortune that has overtaken him. His sleep is not a peaceful sleep. And one night, it is disturbed by a dream, the sort of dream a person remembers for years to come.**

 **In his dream Joseph is approached by a bright heavenly figure - an angel of the Lord. The angel calls Joseph by name and reminds him that one of his ancestors was David, Israel’s greatest king. The angel then tells Joseph not to be afraid, but to keep his pledge to marry Mary, in spite of any rumors he might have heard. The child that Mary carries, says the angel, is a gift from God, through the Holy Spirit. The baby will be a boy, and his name will be Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”**

 **When Joseph wakes up, he is strangely at peace. Being a man of faith, Joseph does what the angel told him to do. He marries Mary, as planned, the baby is born, and he is named Jesus. And people rightly assume that Joseph is his father. Joseph and Mary know otherwise.**

 **Now, there my friends, in any other circumstance, is the context for a first rate crisis! For both Mary and Joseph, this very real human dilemma represents the potential for a great deal of trouble - a menacing dark cloud that threatens their future. And what happens? The first thing we know is, Joseph does not succumb to the crisis. Instead, he receives a divine message that changes everything.**

 **However, that divine message would have been useless except for one thing - Joseph’s faith in God, and his willingness to hear the angel’s message and act upon it. As the story unfolds, we learn that this will not be the only dream that Joseph has. It is but the first in a series of dreams that come to him. Each one of them meant to guide him as he seeks to keep his family intact and out of harm’s way. And, faithful Joseph, open to God’s call on his life, hears those messages and acts on them.**

 **The first dream is the one in which he is directed to marry Mary and to name the child Jesus. In the second dream, the Lord’s angel tells Joseph to take his family to Egypt, because Herod, the king, is trying to kill their child. Once Herod is dead, however, Joseph is told in yet another dream, to bring his family back to Israel. Later, another dream warns him not to settle in Judea, where Herod’s son is now the ruler, but to go instead to Nazareth in Galilee.**

 **In every instance Joseph, facing one crisis after another, hears God’s message and acts on it. In a short period of time, Joseph faces enough trouble to make most people throw up their hands in total despair. Yet, Joseph hears the messages intended for him and takes the necessary action. Prompting us, my brothers and sisters, to ask yet another question. What is it that made Joseph so receptive to God’s direction in his life?**

 **Well, consider for a moment how Joseph is described in the Gospel. The word applied to him is ‘righteous.’ Joseph is a righteous man. Meaning he is obedient to God as he knows God. God is not a stranger to Joseph. So, when a crisis comes along God sends him a message, Joseph hears the message, and does what must be done. Joseph was a man of faith before the crisis, so that when the crisis comes he is able to act in faith - he is able to do the right thing.**

 **My friends, we would do well to reflect on Joseph’s story this morning. In his story lies an important lesson for all of us. Joseph is witness to the power and effectiveness of a life of prayer. If we, like Joseph, are in a relationship with God through a life that includes daily prayer - if we value God’s company on ordinary days, then, on the day a crisis arrives, and our world seems to be coming apart at the seems, we will recognize God’s voice speaking to us at the heart of that crisis. We will respond in faith by doing what God would have us do, by living as God would have us live.**

 **Now, I know there are some people who will say, “Life is challenging enough if you have faith; what happens to people who have no faith, who don’t lead prayerful lives?” What happens to them when the inevitable crisis occurs?**

 **My friends, that’s where God comes into the picture. Can you imagine what happens when people without faith, without a relationship with God, lose a loved one? How are they able to hear God’s voice speaking to them when their grief shouts so hopelessly over God’s love? In troubled times it can be difficult at best for anyone to hear the voice of God extending God’s love. But how much harder it must be without engaging in the regular practice of daily prayer and developing the habit of listening to God in better times.**

 **My brothers and sisters, God speaks to God’s people in a variety of ways. For Joseph, it was through the Jewish law and those remarkable series of dreams. For others, it may happen through the reading of scripture and through the experience of regular worship, or through personal devotions, or the shared faith of others who love us and care about us.**

 **However that happens for you, our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer tells us that prayer is a combination of both words and actions. And no one who knows how to pray will ever say it is easy. Truth is, the daily routine of prayer can sometimes seem empty and laborious. But deep within the practice of regular prayer lies a profound connection with our God. A God who always loves us and will never abandon us.**

 **So, Aly and Ryan, Jennifer and Wesley, if there is one thing you take away from this day on which God claims Wesley Daniel as his own forever, I want to encourage you to teach him how to pray. And pray with him. Show him how. For a number of reasons. One of the most important is that through our prayers, we respond to God, deepen our relationship with God, and more easily recognize God’s divine voice when it speaks to us - especially in the midst of the crises that will inevitably come in our lives. Teach Wesley that it is through his prayers that he will find the choices he needs to respond to the difficult times he will encounter in life. And be an active witness to that understanding for Wesley in your own lives.**

 **And let me share one last, important point. Our prayers, and our response to God, are never simply private ones. What each one of us does in response to listening to God’s voice, has an instant impact on our lives - often times beyond our ability to comprehend.**

 **My brothers and sisters, only God knows to what extent your relationship with God will impact the world around you. For Joseph it was to become the father of Jesus - a man, and a God, who brought us salvation. One of the questions you might want to add to your daily prayers is, what will be the impact of my life on the world around me? Amen.**