

Sermon on Matthew 1:18-25

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The passages of scripture that we just heard from Isaiah and from the Gospel of Matthew, talk about signs.

The epistle to the Romans also speaks of God promising the coming of Jesus Christ through prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. In this season of Advent, all of these writings remind us that we are being called to watch, to wait, and to look for signs, as did the prophets.

It was ok for the prophets to look for signs, by the way, but regular people in the Bible are sometimes admonished for asking God for signs. They are sometimes told to simply trust, and to hang in there, and wait for God's will to be manifest.

But that's hard to do, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I like to have some preparation for things. Before I travel, I want to know what the weather is going to be. I want to see photos of the hotel rooms and read the reviews of the people who've stayed there. I want to map everything out on Google Maps a half a dozen times just in case the GPS on my phone decides to fail and leaves me high and dry. I want to know what I am getting into.

But that's not how God works, is it? As believers, we sometimes ask "God can you give me a sign?" When our lives seem to be out of sync, or we're stuck in a bad situation and longing for rescue, or we have a big decision to make, we as faithful Christians want to know what God wants us to do.

It is always our desire walk in God's ways and to do God's will but how can we do that without signs? How can we know we're on the right path when we don't have a spiritual GPS?

Joseph, in this passage from the beginning of Matthew, is given a really big sign even though he wasn't a prophet. He was simply a righteous and humble man. God knew that it would be tough to convince Joseph that Mary had conceived not from adultery, but by the Holy Spirit and that her child would save his people from their sins. God knew that if Mary told Joseph that she had been visited by an angel who announced all these things to her, Joseph would go "Oh yeah, RIGHT. Sure, that happened." The story seemed too crazy. No rational person would accept that story as the truth. God's plan for Joseph and Mary was so radical, so out of the ordinary, that God had to send angels to explain it.

The rest of us don't get visits from angels, though. We don't see burning bushes. We don't get little post-its from God with messages on them. So, what can we do? How can we know God's will for us? How can we walk in God's ways?

The best piece of advice I can give you about that is – work on your prayer life. I promise you that if you dedicate yourself to growing closer to God through your prayer life, you will begin to know God's will. Before I entered the convent, I only knew one way to pray. Every day I'd thank God for all my blessings, ask God for forgiveness of my sins, then I would ask God to help certain people who were in need. Aside from reading prayers out loud in worship, I didn't know there was any other way to pray. When I became a religious Sister, one of the first things I learned is that there are infinite ways to pray. Whatever brings you closer to God – whether it be walking in nature, listening to music, spending time with loved ones – is prayer. Our goal in prayer is to spend time with our loving God and to become closer to Him. Sometimes a method of prayer only works for a few years, then we have to find a new one. Sometimes the prescribed methods of prayer fall flat, and we have to find something unique. The process of finding new ways of connecting with God is a lifelong pursuit, and it deepens the communication.

Before I worked on my prayer life, my conversation with God was one-sided. I did all the talking and I may as well have been yelling into an abyss. I heard nothing. When I started finding ways to connect with God, I heard His loving,

compassionate voice in my soul, in my bones, and in my DNA. I no longer need a bolt of lightning, or an angelic messenger, to know God's will. I feel it.

That's not to say it's always perfect. There are still plenty of times when I have to say one of my favorite prayers which is basically "God – I've got nothin' here. You're going to have to help me out. I don't have a clue." and God always shows me the way either in the moment, or in hindsight.

Joseph was a devout Jewish man. He followed the laws of his people, and he trusted in his living God. Not much is known about Joseph, but I would say there's a pretty good chance that he had a very close relationship with his creator. He sought to do God's will, and God showed him the way. Joseph didn't dismiss the angel that appeared to him. He didn't reject it as simply a figure in his dream. He didn't chalk it up to anxiety, or fantasy. He listened. God spoke to Mary, and God spoke to Joseph, and they listened, and their faithfulness changed the world forever.

Let us give thanks for all those who have gone before us and listened and let us pray without ceasing so that we may also, always watch, wait, and listen.