

The Way of Faithfulness
Fourth in an Advent Series

“...he did what the angel of the Lord commanded.”

Matt 1:24

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They adorn churches across the globe. Some are extravagantly ornate while others are plain and simple. The smallest one fits inside the shell of a walnut, or inside the eye of a needle, while the largest one contains 1,389 individual figures and animals, and fills an entire room.

Traditionally displayed the beginning of Advent, the beloved scene takes place in homes, apartments, churches, military chapels, dormitories, lobbies, and even outside on the lawn.

Depicting one of if not the most famous moments of all time. I am of course talking about the nativity, or the creche. (SLIDE)



Tradition has credited Saint Francis of Assisi with creating the first crèche in 1223 - (SLIDE)



when he displayed a living nativity, consisting of a manger, an ox and a donkey, as part of a Christmas Eve Mass he organized while visiting the mountain town of Greccio. Story goes that he was concerned and broken hearted that people were more and more interested in material things than the true meaning of Christmas.

St. Bonaventure wrote of that night in his biography of St. Francis, "A certain valiant and veracious soldier, Master John of Greccio, who, for the love of Christ, had left the warfare of this world, and become a dear friend of this holy man, affirmed that he beheld an Infant marvellously beautiful, sleeping in the manger, Whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep."

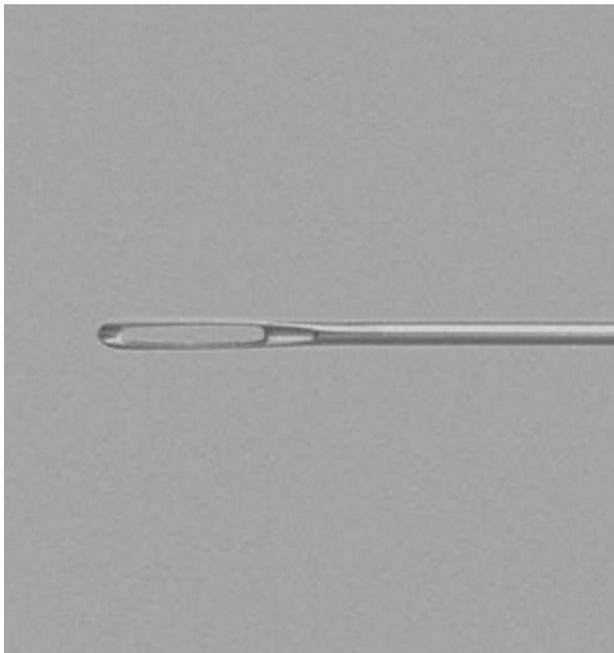
After that first nativity scene, the practice became popular and spread far and wide. Within a century, virtually every church in Italy, had taken to

displaying the Holy Family. Over time, statues, (SLIDE)



rather than living people and animals, were used, which eventually led to the in-home nativity scenes that are so much a part of Christmas today.

As mentioned, the world's smallest nativity scene fits 39 pieces inside a nutshell. But then I found this image of one fitting inside the eye of a needle. SLIDES





Many scholars believe that the oldest crèche in Italy is a group of marble figures housed in Rome's Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore and attributed to the sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio; the figures have been variously dated from 1284 to 1289.

From the elaborate (SLIDE)



To the out of the box, fun and creative, SLIDE OF HAND NATIVITY

To the simple yet beautiful (SLIDE)



The nativity scene has come to symbolize the greatest story ever told. A story of hope in the midst of uncertainty, life in the midst of death, and peace in the midst of chaos.

Depending on where you stand in the stable, whether with Mary, the shepherds, wisemen or the animals, you will hear a slightly different perspective of the same event. Each character bringing their unique experience surrounding the birth of Jesus.

This fourth weekend of Advent, after we have walked the way of peace, vision, and fearlessness, we invite you to consider NOT what Mary can teach us. Not what the shepherds or wise men, or even Jesus have to offer. Today we invite you to consider what Joseph can teach us about faithfulness.

Listen to what he has to say in his part of story found in Matthew 1:18-25

Did you hear that? Neither did I. Interesting isn't it, Joseph doesn't actually say anything...not with words anyway. Maybe that is the first important lesson of faithfulness.

At first glance, there is nothing striking about this man. Have you ever seen a Christmas play where Joseph had the lead? Have you ever heard sermons or eulogies in praise of him? When looking at a nativity scene, once seeing Joseph, did you ever pay him any attention?

Though he is mentioned, there is not recorded one single word that he spoke. His appearance is so brief that Joseph is mentioned only in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. He has a walk-on, non-speaking part for one brief scene, then disappears from the gospel stage. Mary sings, coos and beams and acknowledges all the visitors, shepherds adore, angels bring good news of great joy, wise men bring gifts, and even the children cast as sheep and cows get to make animal noises, but Joseph only gets to stand there. Obviously, in the eyes of most of us, he is but a peripheral figure - a sideline to the whole story.

In Matthew's text, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Here is Joseph, who grappled with the unexpected and upsetting intrusion of the Holy Spirit into his nicely planned life. In fact, if you stop and think about it, in Matthew, the whole miracle of Christmas momentarily rested on Joseph's shoulders, awaiting his freely chosen decision to either accept or reject the stunning news of an impending Messiah - and the shocking way in which this gift of salvation for the world would enter the world. It was one thing to read and contemplate the prophets and their words. It was quite another to have one's own betrothed suddenly become the chosen one to be pregnant though not yet married.

Joseph's reaction shows us the depth of this man and the faithfulness he has to God. When he could have turned and walked away from all the struggle, tension, and uncertainty, Joseph remained faithful and put his trust in God (and in Mary).

The lesson he gives without words speaks volumes to what it means to live the way of faithfulness.

He had his doubts and fears but I believe there is a difference between faithful doubt and a doubting faith. (SLIDE)

Faithful Doubt VS Doubting Faith

Faithful Doubt is knowing there will always be questions we may never find answers too. Faithful doubt accepts that not everything goes according to our plans. Faithful doubt realizes there is a tension of give and take that holds all the beauty, goodness and truth in balance. Faithful doubt leads us to into deeper / harder questions and it is through our uncertainty and dependence on God, we find ourselves seeking that relationship more intently. Faithful Doubt is still doubt and it can shake our foundation of faith, BUT it does not destroy our identity in Christ.

Doubting Faith is a different thing. Doubting Faith is when uncertainty overwhelms our faith - swallows it up in some way. Doubting Faith takes what we know to be truth and convinces us of a false narrative. That is when fear gains the upper hand and we succumb to our doubts. That is when we live from a place of brokenness, shame, and fear rather than faith.

As Joseph wrestled with questions surrounding what he should or should not do, he experienced, I believe, a kind of faithful doubt. He had to process what was being spoken, what he had come to believe, what his role was to be, his feelings for Mary, his understanding of scripture and law, his obedience to God, the impact his decision would have on others, what he was willing to risk and/or give up, and how all of it would change his life one way or another.

I know each one of us has at one time or another, or maybe even as we speak, have wrestled with questions of life and faith; have had to make big decisions, now we know Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, did too. The entirety of God's messianic plan rested in the hands of Joseph.

We know from vs. 19, Joseph was righteous as well as compassionate, for he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. But it is vers 20 that reveals what is considered the most noteworthy of Joseph's character, his faithfulness to God and acceptance of God's word. Both the predictions and accepting the burden of the resulting consequences take no small act of faith.

It is no small act for us either. We are constantly challenged to make decisions and choices, judgement calls and best guesses. We are all pushed and pulled to do this or that, believe this or that, trust us or them, and we have all felt the pressure of figuring out what to do, where to go, and when or how to get there. We know the struggle it is to be faithful to God, others and ourselves.

This last weekend before Christmas, we ask ourselves: What does it mean to walk the way of faithfulness? How do we practice faithfulness? What acts of faith have we participated in or experienced this Advent season? How do we live out our faithfulness in our world so divided, a culture so skeptical, and a society that feeds on fear?

We do as Joseph did. We take our place. We listen. We take time to discern what is going on, we question, we consider what is at risk, who is involved, and how God is moving in our midst. We use our questions and doubts to bring us closer to God. We dig deep and remain faithful to the One who is, and was and will be faithful to us.

The way of faithfulness demands of us obedience, not out of punishment but for joyfulness in what God has for us. The way of faithfulness takes work - hard mental, emotional, and spiritual work - the kind of work that doesn't always make sense to others - the kind of work that makes us want to take the detours and shortcuts that make it look so much easier. The way of faithfulness requires a kind of courage and resolve that comes from that deep place within, where the Spirit connects you and God.

It is by faith we find our way not just these last few days of Advent and into Christmas, but all the way to the cross, and into so much more of what God wants to unwrap for us.

Listen to the promise of the angels, "do not be afraid...his name shall be Emmanuel, God with us." God is with you, each of you, no matter where you are or what's going on in your life.

Dear church, walk with us these last few steps to the manger and behold good news of great joy. Amen.