

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Once Upon a Time for Real: Trusting in God

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Isaiah 7:10-17

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah — the king of Assyria.'

I was standing on the edge of the porch, my back facing outwards, my arms crossed and I was supposed to fall backwards with complete trust that the people standing behind me were going to catch me. It was probably 1970 and people were into trust exercises. This had been a youth group exercise and I had been one of the catchers, which was actually an amazing experience. People would cross their arms, close their eyes and fall...and we would catch them. Regardless of their weight, the shared strength of the group would insure that they never fell to the ground. But now it was my time to fall. Honestly I could not tell you what was going through my conscious mind at the moment I fell, but I can tell you what my subconscious was saying. "Who are these people? You can't trust these people! Protect yourself!" I know this because as I fell my arms came out to brace myself, and like a missile I shot right through their arms. The ground hurt.

Trust is an amazing thing isn't it. Most of us are fortunate enough to learn how to trust as infants. We cry and someone picks us. They change our diapers, feed us or simply hold us close. That closeness allows us then to go out into the big world and trust complete strangers. However what most of us learn along the way is that there are people we can trust and those we cannot trust. Most of us learn this early on in school. We discover that

there are certain people to whom we can tell our deepest secrets and they will keep them as surely as if they were locked into a vault without a key. We also discover that there are other people that if we were to tell them our deepest secrets we might as well put them on Facebook, Twitter and the Five O'clock news because everyone will know our secrets within five minutes. We discover that there are people we can trust to work with on projects. They will get their parts done. Then there are other people that we hope and pray the teacher will not put in our groups because they never do their part. Two categories...those we can and those we cannot trust.

The question for God's people has always been into which of these two categories does God fall? Is God someone we can trust? Or is God someone on whom we can't really depend? I realize that the answer to this question ought to be obvious, but sometimes in real life it isn't. Sometimes the situations in real life are so difficult and trying that we wonder if God will come through? So this morning we will spend some time with two "Once Upon a Time for Real" stories which hopefully will help us understand into which category God ought to go.

The first story is about a king named Ahaz. Ahaz had a problem. There were two other kings who wanted to take away his kingdom and make someone else king because he refused to work with them to defeat some people called the Assyrians. Ahaz had two choices as to what to do. He could trust God because God had already told Ahaz that God would protect him. But Ahaz could also trust in the Assyrians who said that they would come to his rescue if he sided with them. Our passage speaks of God even giving Ahaz a sign as proof of God's trustworthiness. So which choice did he make?

Our second story is a more familiar one. It concerns Joseph, as in Mary and Joseph. Joseph as we will discover is engaged to Mary. He discovers that she is pregnant and he knows that the child is not his. He plans to put her away. An angel arrives and tells him that the baby is God's and Joseph is to stay with Mary and adopt Jesus. Joseph has a choice. He can trust the religious Law which says he ought to divorce Mary or he can trust God and God's angels. So which choice did he make?

What is fascinating to me is that they made different choices. Ahaz chose the Assyrians. He in fact paid them money to destroy his enemies...which they did, even though the enemies were also Hebrews who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Afterwards Ahaz had an altar to the gods of Assyria made and placed in the Temple in Jerusalem. What is sad though is chances are had he trusted Isaiah and God, all of God's people might have survived. Joseph on the other hand chose to trust in God. He married Mary and took Jesus in as his own son. By so doing Jesus became a descendant of David and savior of the world.

So the question is into which of the two categories does God fall; the one composed of those we trust or the one in which we place those we cannot trust? I hope that our "once upon a time for real stories" show that the God not only belongs in the "whom we can trust" category but also defines what that category looks like. In each case God was faithful to the promises that God had made. God took care of those who were oppressing Ahaz's people and God sent a messiah through Mary. Granted, these are only two stories. If that were all there were we might not have much of a case for trusting God. But the wondrous thing is, is that there are more stories. The first place we can find them is in this book (the Bible). From beginning to end it is filled with stories of God's absolute faithfulness. The second place we can find them is in our lives. My guess is that many of

you here this morning have your own “Once Upon a Time for Real” story of God’s faithfulness to you...which brings me this week’s challenge, or perhaps better put, assignment, if you choose to take it.

What I am asking you to do is to write down a “Once Upon a Time for Real” story when God was faithful to you; when you learned that you could trust God. Then, if you are willing send it to me, and you can change all of the names if you wish, so that I can put them in the back of the church. My hope is that by so doing we will discover that God can continue to be trusted now and always.