

HIGHER CALLING
21st DECEMBER 2025
(4th Sunday of Advent)

READINGSⁱ

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted
up,
and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become
level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*All flesh is grass;
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers; the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,*

*O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"
See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him
and his recompense before him.*

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms
and carry them in his bosom
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce 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 fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to 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 given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,

Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

As many of you know, our family had a holiday in Bali where there is a big and growing population of foreigners—including many from Australia—who try to make a living from the island. They are known as the 'digital nomads'. Many of them are young entrepreneurs who reject the idea of working in an office for another person/company, and choose to create their own (digital) company. They want to be free to choose to live in an idyllic place, like Bali, while serving their clients hundreds if not thousands of kilometers away on the other side of the globe.

Friends, our modern world likes to tell us that we can find a meaningful life by finding or making our own way, and to pursue success in it. I think this is encapsulated in that song, popularized by Frank Sinatra, May Way.

“Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption
I planned each charted course
Each careful step along the byway
And more, much more than this,
I did it my way”

While I can't say that pursuing this path in life is eventually meaningless—some do genuinely find meaning in their hardwork—our readings today in the Bible offer us a different alternative.

In the readings, we meet two people who are very different, yet who seem to be connected by the same value.

First, we meet Joseph, an ordinary man from the land of Judea in the first century. We hear nothing remarkable about the man, only that he is engaged to a woman named Mary. But, in the life of this very ordinary man, a very extraordinary event happens: Mary, his fiancée, is already pregnant and the baby has a divine origin!

Now, the Gospel of Matthew makes Joseph to be somehow better than what he may actually be. I mean, if I were Joseph, I would be furious if I knew that my fiancée was already pregnant and the baby was not mine! So, if Joseph decided to leave Mary, he has every right to do so!

Yet, this is where 'obedience' comes into play. The angel in his dream asks Joseph to do what seems to be a rather simple task. Joseph is to marry his already pregnant fiancée.

But there is nothing simple about the task.

First, obviously, it is heart breaking since the baby in Mary is not his! Second, in ancient time, and in many societies today, to be pregnant out of wedlock is a serious moral failure; and Joseph is going to bear this burden for the rest of his life,

Yet, somehow, Joseph accepts the divine task and, by doing that, he submits himself into the unknown. He puts aside his own comfort and his own plan for the future. He also puts his own reputation on the line to answer the divine call.

Joseph even names the baby: Jesus. Now, this may look like a simple gesture on Joseph's part, but it's nothing to be ignored. By naming the baby, Joseph publicly declares that the baby is his own son.ⁱⁱ His fate and the baby's have now been forever intertwined, and Joseph is no longer a man of his own.

We see a similar kind of obedience in the life of Paul.

Now, Paul appears in the Bible, for the very first time, in the book of Acts as Saul: an ambitious young man who is trying to make a mark in the religious landscape in Judea. Back then, Saul tries hard to prove himself as the most pious at least amongst his fellow Pharisees. And he tries to achieve that status by eagerly persecuting the followers of the man named Jesus.

Yet, according to the book of Acts, a dramatic thing happens to Saul and the man who used to be the worst persecutor of the Church becomes one of its most ardent missionaries.ⁱⁱⁱ Saul has been transformed into Paul.

In our reading today from his letter to the Romans, Paul even introduces himself, first and foremost, before anything else, as the *slave* of Christ!^{iv}

Now, our English translation is trying to be politically correct and translate the Greek word, *doulos* (δοῦλος), as ‘servant’. But Paul does not see himself merely as a free man who serves another person; he sees himself as a slave, bound to his master!

For Paul, the Church is like an ancient household where the believers are the family members while Paul is as the slave of the head of the family, Christ. As a slave, Paul sees himself as entirely owned by Jesus, his master. As a slave, he has submitted himself entirely to Jesus, his master.

As a slave of Christ, his role, therefore, is not to represent himself or to express his own will; his role is to represent his master and to express his master’s will to the entire household. His role is not to put himself as the leader of his master’s household, but as the servant of his master’s house. This is certainly nothing like what he envisions when he is still young, trying to make a name for himself in the world.

Friends, unlike the wisdom of the world that tells us to forge our own destiny, today, we learn from these two Biblical characters that our purpose in life is found not by doing it “my way”, but by surrendering ourselves to a higher calling.

And make no mistake: God calls everyone. No, God does not call only the Ministers, or the Deacons, or the Priests, or the Pastors, or the other full-time members of the Clergy, or other professional ministerial roles. No. God calls EVERYONE to do God’s work.

Whenever there is an Ordination service of a new Minister/Deacon in the Uniting Church, I always make the effort to attend. Now, a significant part of the Ordination service is the narrative about God’s calling of the person into full-time Ministry.

But, I always feel rather troubled by this practice. Why? Because, in the Uniting Church circle at least, we only hear about this kind of story during an event like the ordination of a full-time Minister or Deacon.

But, what about the story of God's calling of someone to be an Elder or a Council member or a Pastoral Partner or teacher or an assistance teacher or a greeter or a morning tea helper? What about the story of God's calling of people to serve in their workplace or marketplace? God calls ALL people, ALL of us here to do God's work in whatever capacity we are capable of.

Indeed, God calls ALL believers to be *witnesses* to the resurrected Christ and the resurrected life that he promises to all. In other words, God calls all of us—you and me—to become God's *apostle*!

Now, an *apostle* is a messenger of a divine message.^v Second to him being a slave to Christ, Paul sees himself as Christ's *apostle*, his messenger.^{vi}

But Paul does not see apostleship as an exclusive role. He says in his letter to the Romans:

“Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom we have received *grace* and *apostleship* to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name, *including* you who are *called* to belong to Jesus Christ ...”

(Romans 1:4-6 NRSV)

For Paul, God has given grace and apostleship to *all* who belong to Jesus Christ!

I think this is in line with the idea in our reading from the book of Isaiah where the Prophet figuratively sees Zion, the hill where Jerusalem is located, and the city of Jerusalem itself as the herald of God's arrival amongst the people!

“Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”
(Isaiah 40:9 NRSV)

In the end of the day, everyone is called to be a ‘saint’, to live a life of holiness or to be holy, which means, in Paul’s words, to be “set apart for the gospel of God.”^{vii}

See, friends, when the angel appears in Joseph’s dream, Joseph is not called to be a prophet like Isaiah or to be a priest like Aaron or to be a leader of the people like Moses. As far as we know, Joseph continues to be a carpenter for the rest of his life, passing on his expertise to his ‘adopted’ son, Jesus. Yet, by being who he is: a father and a carpenter, he fulfills one of the most important tasks in the world: raising the Messiah, the Saviour from God!

Friends, the theme for this Sunday of Advent is joy. And today we learn that true and deep-seated joy is found not by pursuing ‘my way’ or by making a name for ourselves; true and everlasting joy in life is found by surrendering ourselves to a higher calling, and to submit ourselves to a new identity that this call brings to us.

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Is there something good that you have been thinking of doing, but you haven't had the opportunity to do it?
2. Perhaps that feeling of being 'nudged' is God's calling you. How would you respond to that call?
3. What sacrifices do you need to make to answer the call? Are you willing to pay the price?

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

ⁱⁱ Joel B. Green, *Commentary on Romans 1-1-7* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Fourth Sunday of Advent (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Acts 9:1-19.

^{iv} “Paul, a *servant* of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God....” (Romans 1:1 NRSV)

^v Joel B. Green, *Commentary on Romans 1-1-7* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Fourth Sunday of Advent (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>).

^{vi} “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an *apostle*, set apart for the gospel of God....” (Romans 1:1 NRSV)

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