

Don't you love the last-minute stories? At the last minute Old Man Marley saves Kevin from the Wet Bandits with a couple of whacks of a snow shovel. At the last minute New Yorkers sing with cheer for all to hear, producing just enough Christmas spirit to power Santa's sleigh. At the last minute, all the citizens of Bedford Falls bring their cash to rescue the Savings & Loan. No spoiler alert! You either know these or you don't. We even watched a Hallmark Christmas movie this month: Five Star Christmas. At the last minute, Lucy decided to leave that big city job and take a chance on the new boyfriend she found back in her hometown where she had to help save the family Bed and Breakfast! Actually, isn't that the plot of every Hallmark Christmas movie? I cried. Most important film of the year. We love the last minute. You have to hang in there to the last minute or you'll miss it. You have to hang on a minute. If there is one thing 2020 has done, it is to teach us to hang on a minute.

I chose Joseph for us this year. I think this is a hard year to face Christmas, to be honest. None of us get to do what we want. Nothing we have going is as we would like it to be. We're making the most of it, but you'd be forgiven to feel just a little grumpy. If there's one figure in the Bible that had

the right to be a little grumpy at Christmas, it's Joseph. But Joseph hung on a minute. He was able to hang in there and see—God is up to something. Something worth the frustration, worth the struggle, worth sticking it out to see happen. God loves the last minute. Hang on for it.

"This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:18) "Found to be pregnant." Don't you love the way the Bible puts things sometimes? "Found to be pregnant. Well that's just great. My fiancé has been found to be pregnant." That's the first test for Joseph. What to do now? What to believe? If I were in his shoes, I might let just a little bit of cynicism slip in. Cynicism is the conviction that you already know how it's going to turn out before the story begins.

It's not uncommon for cynicism to accompany Christmas. The pressure out there to make it happen, to produce the feelings, to manifest the Christmas magic, it can all push your heart the other direction. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it's really just a jaded pessimism that tries to protect your heart from disappointment. It doesn't protect you. It doesn't help. It traps you, binds your potential, cuts possibility short and shrinks your life. A study in the medical journal Neurology in 2014 found that people with high levels of cynical distrust are three times more likely to develop dementia, have a hard

time recovering from illness and demonstrate low resilience. What feels like being in control and above things is actually making your heart brittle and stale. We don't need cynicism. We need

Wonder!

Joseph held in there. Joseph the Silent. You know he never says a word. But we watch his actions. He held in there. "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). That's noble. That's godly, actually. True righteousness is more than moral purity; it's a willingness to endure the shame of others, to let their mistakes become your burden. That's Christ-like righteousness. We know Mary made no mistake. She had no cause for shame. Joseph didn't know that. Not yet. Still he was willing to resist the urge to defend his name. Whatever needed to happen would be done in love, not spite. Again, what would you do if you were Joseph? "Well, now I know who this woman really is I was about to spend the rest of my life with. I know how this all turns out now too. My life is trashed. My reputation is tanked. My dreams are in the dumpster." How quickly we write the whole story, don't we? I know I do. "Oh great! Now I have to wear a mask for the rest of my life. We're

never going to be able to do
church again. We might as
well throw away our
luggage

because we will never get to go anywhere or do anything or see anyone or have any fun at all ever again!" That was me yesterday morning over coffee. Hang on a minute.

Then came the angel. "But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Matthew 1:20). Hang on a minute! This is the ultimate 'hang on a minute' moment. An angel. A dream. But it's more than a dream. God. God is up to something. God is involved. What's that phrase? "...from the Holy Spirit." Oh yeah. And I read that before, although I didn't even hear it. All I heard was "found to be pregnant." But it said in that first verse, "through the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit. God is doing something. God is involved. Hang on just a minute.

Something in Joseph is humble enough to stop himself, to stop the cynicism and the jaded know-it-all attitude and be open, just a crack, to the possibility that God is doing something bigger. Part of him says, I know what really happened. But part of him remembers, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of

God, the Maker of all things.” (Ecclesiastes 11:5) Part of him can write the whole sordid story from here forward, but another part recognizes that God’s work, the Holy Spirit, it’s wonderful and mysterious. Jesus would say, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Born of the Spirit. I wonder. Friends, I don’t think there is any better message in Christmas 2020 than this: God is involved. That’s big. That’s a wonder. Hang on a minute.

A pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached at Christmas as Germany fell into the grip of rising Nazi power. He preached on Luke 21:28, “Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Bonhoeffer said: “Advent (Christmas) creates people, new people. We too are supposed to become new people in Advent. Look up, you whose gaze is fixed on this earth, who are spellbound by the little events and changes on the face of the earth. Look up to these words, you who have turned away from heaven disappointed. Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears... Look up, you who, burdened with guilt, cannot lift your eyes. Look up, your redemption is drawing near. Something different from

what you see daily will happen. Just be aware, be watchful, wait just another short moment. Wait and something quite new will break over you: God will come.”

How dark is it? How dire? Hang on a minute. It isn’t over yet. The angel keeps going with Joseph. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). God is at work. In fact, the baby is God at work, God at work to save. A Savior. Name him “Jesus” because it means “God Saves.” A lot of times the kind of saving we want is being saved from inconvenience, saved from bad situations, saved from frustrations and the mess of life. Maybe Joseph knew enough to know, the real saving we need is from sin. At the very root of all that is wrong in this world is our disobedient rebellion from God. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’)” (Matthew 1:22-23). Name him Jesus, God saves. He is Immanuel, God with us. God saves by being with us. The Above-Us-God comes down to be the With-Us-God in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world.

If anyone had cause to be grumpy at Christmas it was Joseph. But Joseph chose a different track. There’s a famous quote going around from the boxer Mike Tyson, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

That's a good quote for this year. Joseph took a punch. He got knocked down, then he got back up. He didn't give in to cynicism. No jaded pessimism. Instead, he stood up and chose selfless, hopeful, obedient, active faith. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." (Matthew 1:24) Joseph the Silent is also Joseph the Obedient. He never said a word. His actions speak louder than words.

What can we say about a year like 2020? A friend of mine who is also a pastor said around June, "Well it's not the year we wanted, but maybe it's the year we needed." I could see that then. We were all learning so much. We learned how to stop our racing lives. We learned about home. It's a different place when it's more than just a landing pad to refuel in between trips. We felt closer as families. We learned to worship. Not just go to church and watch what happens, but to say: if God is going to be worshipped, if I'm going to give God the glory He deserves, I have to do it, from my heart, in front of this screen. Good lessons. Sure. But then it kept going. More pain set in. The loss of lives. The damaging effects of lockdowns. Businesses closed. Restaurants shuttered. Nerves frayed, burnout set in for some, marriages ended for

others. It will be years before we know the damage done to our children. Not the year we wanted, and not anything I would wish on you again.

But hang on a minute. What is God doing in such a year? Could God be up to something? Revealing deep needs. Calling us to repent. Showing us frailty, mortality. Realigning our values. Uniting a world in common cause. Revealing deep needs only met in Christ. Resist the jaded pessimism and open up to the Wonder. "Look among the nations and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told" (Habakkuk 1:5). Joseph was able to hang in there. Hang in there. God is up to something, I'm sure of it. You will see it. The child in Mary's womb is the Lord Himself, come to set us free. Hang in there like Mary. Hang in there like Joseph. Hang in there like the disciples after Jesus died on the cross and was laid to rest, cold in his grave. Hang in there. God loves the last minute.

So, at the end of 2020, let's light a candle. A light to bless our city, a light to shine hope on tomorrow, a light to bear witness that Christ has come, Jesus took on flesh, and if God himself would walk the earth in Jesus Christ his Son, anything is possible and we can keep our hearts open to the Wonder of Christmas.