

Sermon Notes – December 3, 2017
“Purpose Driven Life”
Brian Walton

My son bought a van – it is a reflection of his growing family and his busy life. With a third child on the way Hartley thought it prudent to have a vehicle big enough to shuffle his growing family from activity to activity. As a Grandpa I sometimes sit back and ponder his life. This fall Hartley was on the road supervising highway construction, often working ten or twelve hour days; my daughter-in-law continued to work for a mining company during the day and spent evenings studying for her Chartered Accountant designation. Two kids in daycare, evenings are filled with dance lessons and swimming lessons; weekends are spent meeting the hopes of grandparents from both sides who want to visit and see the grandchildren. Although Andy is a little further along the parenting continuum I imagine demands such as the ones confronting him this weekend, will arise for my kids in a very short while.

Of course, young families aren't the only ones with busy lives. Victoria and I were looking ahead a couple of weeks and noted social commitments on Dec. 14, 15, 16 and 17. In addition to her day job Victoria has started a small private practice; and, at sixty-four, I'm working as much as I did when I was thirty and wondering who might employ me at the end

of June. Our energy level is different than our kids, but some days it seems we are as busy, searching for those precious moments of quiet.

A recent study of working professionals revealed that 65% are expected to be available outside of normal work hours. When I sat at the Director's table in the health region on Monday mornings, most of my colleagues had worked Sunday afternoons preparing for the meeting and were monitoring their phones as early as 6 AM. One author observes that, "over the past few years the (office) cubicle has camouflaged itself as our living room, kitchen and even our bedroom." (This is true for my son and son-in-law and countless others who are responding to work emails in the midst of family suppers.)

At the beginning of the 21st century a new word was added to the British dictionary. The word is "time-poverty" and it describes the reality of being financially secure but with no time to truly live one's life. All of this came home to me recently when I heard a thirty-five year old University administrator say: "I thought I had *no time in my life*; until I realized *I had no life in my time*."

The incessant busyness for so many in our culture – like Andy and Nicole or my son and daughter-in-law, or even ourselves, is heightened in

this pre-Christmas season as the pace gets ramped up with Christmas parties, shopping, cooking, travel and increased family dynamics.

During advent we are focusing on certain characters from the Christmas story to see if they have any wisdom for our lives. This morning we are considering the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It may seem strange to read about her so early in the Advent-Christmas season but as I thought about the busyness of life I couldn't help but think about Mary. She has become such an object of piety that we easily miss the realities of her life. When we meet her at the beginning of Luke's gospel her life is verging on chaos. According to her culture she has been pledged in marriage to an older man and we might imagine that wedding plans are being made for her. In the midst of the family swirl she discovers she is pregnant. Immaculate conception or not, it is a predicament to be pregnant during her time of engagement. Joseph steps forward to confirm his commitment to her but in the same breath he explains that they have to travel to Bethlehem because of the Roman census. Pregnant, morning sickness, family pressures, social stigma, enforced travel, financially strapped, spiritually disturbed, and a twenty-mile donkey ride in the final month of pregnancy - not quite the pressures of a modern life, yet the demands and anxieties facing Mary feel almost palpable.

I have been taught that when one reads a text from the Bible it is useful to look for both trouble and grace in the passage. We have just highlighted the troubles Mary faces. But, what is the grace? On a grand theological level there is the idea that God is choosing to be born in the midst of human life – what is called the incarnation. But on a practical level, is there anything that Mary can teach us about living in the chaos of life?

As I pondered this and consulted with the spiritual conversation group a couple of insights came to mind. First was the attitude which Mary brought to her situation. At the tipping point of learning she is pregnant, conceivably with a divine child, Mary offers this small sentence. “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.” Other translations phrase her comment this way: “Let it happen as you have said” or “I am your servant, so let it be so.”

The wisdom is subtle but profound. Her words indicate that she is choosing an attitude towards her life. “Let it happen as you have said.” She does not resist, nor does she despair rather she chooses a response to her situation. A couple of folks in the spiritual conversation group suggested that Mary manages the chaos of her life by choosing the attitude by which she would live. She is not simply a passive recipient of events but

chooses to engage, to make the most of her situation, to be a willing participant in God's plans. She could have said, "I have no time in my life; instead she says, I will choose a life for my time." On a few other Sundays this fall we have considered how attitude shapes our lives. Recall the attitude of the soldier-amputee, Jodi Mittic, and how living with gratitude helped him fully live his life. The attitude of the prodigal's father, pictured in that moving video, allowed him to reunite with his wayward son rather than live a life of resentment. We considered the need to value the positive message that God loves us rather than get stuck in the negative self-talk. Attitude influences how we live our lives and it appears that Mary chooses to actively engage her life.

The other perspective which Mary seems to display is her decision to align herself with God's mission in the world. She believes that God is creating a new way of being in the world and she wants to be a part of that. You might recall that piece of scripture known as the Magnificat or Mary's song, we hear her rejoice in her belief that she is participating in the creation of God's commonwealth of love.

A number of years ago an American evangelical published a book entitled, *A Purpose Driven Life*. It has been reproduced many times and read by thousands upon thousands of people. Although the author and I

may diverge a little in the interpretation of the Christian life I commend his thesis that we need to have a say in our own life. His observation is that many people pursue what they think is the 'good life' defined as "looking good, feeling good and having the goods" but ultimately live with a kind of emptiness lost in unsatisfying work or driven by cultural goals. Mary chooses to align herself with God's goal for the world. It caused me to wonder what it would mean for us to do the same. Jesus calls us to Love God, Love neighbour and Love ourselves. What would it be like if we examined our lives in relation to these goals? What would it be like to examine our work life or our retirement years in light of these goals? How would life look if we measured our volunteer commitments and even our leisure time in light of these goals? Would life be more meaningful, less hectic, more balanced if our focus was love of God, love of neighbour and love of self? Would we be more giving? Would we have more self-compassion? Would we make stillness and prayer a priority?

In the midst of all that chaos Mary chooses to allow her life to be driven by purpose. She chooses to align herself with the God she knew and it carried her from barnyard birth, through flight as a refugee, to the demands of motherhood and to surviving the terrible grief of her son's arrest and death. Through it all her purpose sustained her. Oh, that we

might find our purpose in the ways of the Holy One; oh, that we might eliminate all that is extraneous and that keeps us on a treadmill; oh, that we might open ourselves to God's love so that we too can say "may your purpose be fulfilled in me." Might Mary inspire our living and loving, this Christmas and always. Amen.
