

## **“Under Sealed Orders”**

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*<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

*<sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

*<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”*

*<sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)*

It was March 19, 1927, and Peter Marshall stood leaning against the stern railing of the steamship *Cameronia*, his eyes moist with tears as he watched the purple hills of his beloved Scotland fade into the distance. At that point, the 25-year-old could not begin to explain why he was leaving Glasgow for the United States. Yes, he had sensed a call to ministry for a while, but he had always assumed his future was in Scotland. There were plenty of pulpits in the Church of Scotland. Why would he travel abroad to do something he could do at home?

But somehow -- rather suddenly in fact -- God had made something undeniably clear to Peter Marshall. “It would be hard to describe to anyone how God can make His will so plain to a man,” he later wrote. But “all at once, I knew. The answer was just a clear-cut strong inner conviction, quite unmistakable, that God wanted me in the United States of America.”<sup>1</sup>

The view from the ship reminded him of a time during World War I, when he was just a little boy, watching the crew on a Scottish warship frantically preparing to set sail. The sun was setting, but they were leaving, and leaving in a hurry. He watched as the grey destroyer pushed off the dock and churned west out into the evening mist of the North Sea. No one knew where the ship was headed. In fact, not even officers on board knew. The rendezvous point, the destination, the mission, the threat, the reward... all of it secret... all of it unknown. The ship was sailing, as they say, “under sealed orders.”<sup>2</sup>

That memory came to mind because Marshall was understanding like never before how those officers and crew members must have felt. He too was being called into service... he too had been asked to accept a critical mission and a solemn responsibility... and he too had no idea where he was actually going... no idea what he would actually be called upon to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Marshall, *A Man Called Peter* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1951, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*



He had been commissioned by God to begin a new journey into ministry, but he was heading out under orders that were, for the moment, sealed shut.

I think this is how Joseph must have felt, too. The marriage he had contemplated, the life he had expected, had all been turned on its head. A pregnancy before wedlock was scandalous for all involved. Walking away quietly was a way of taking the high road, minimizing the social stigma that was already gathering around Mary. It was an honorable choice. But then an angelic messenger came to Joseph in a dream and pointed him in a different direction. “Don’t walk away,” the angel says. “Do not be afraid. Take Mary as your wife, name the child Jesus, and be to him the father he needs.”

As Peter Marshall said, it would be hard to describe the ways God can make a divine calling known to a person. But all at once, Joseph knew. The way forward came to him in a clear-cut strong inner conviction, quite unmistakable, that God wanted Joseph to lead the Holy Family. It was an invitation to accept a critical mission, but he had no idea where this mission would take him or what it would require of him. He did not know, for example, that King Herod would soon be hunting him and his family, or they would soon be on the run to a foreign land. These were events that Joseph could neither see nor even imagine. Even so, in the presence of the angel, he was willing to accept a solemn responsibility and set out under sealed orders, not knowing what the future held... what it would all cost... what it would mean to the world.

Still, when he awoke from his dream, there was no hesitation. Scripture says it simply: Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. In many traditions, Joseph is considered a saint for what he accepted and what he did. In our tradition, he is a model for what it means to be a true disciple... someone who embraces a call to follow God’s lead in faithful commitment no matter where the journey might lead or require. Marshall compares people who go out in faith like that to the explorers of old... people like Columbus, Magellan, Balboa, Scott, Lindbergh, and Admiral Byrd. “They all went out in faith,” Marshall wrote, “not knowing what lay ahead.” Going out with fearless trust to follow God’s command, he said, has always been “a venture into the unknown.”<sup>3</sup>

This was certainly true for Marshall. When he dared to place that kind of fearless trust in God, when he steamed out into the ocean mist on that March evening like an explorer of old, Marshall could not have foreseen the mountains God would move to fulfill his calling, nor could he have imagined that he would become one of the most celebrated preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the chaplain of the United States Senate during the critical early days of the Cold War. “I could not foresee,” Marshall wrote, “the wonderful way in which God would open doors of opportunity. I could never have imagined the romantic, thrilling way in which God would arrange my life... order my ways, guide my steps, provide for all my needs, give me wonderful friends, generous helpers, until, at last, I would achieve His plan for me, and be ordained a minister of the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

As disciples, this is what we are preparing to meet in the manger: a force for righteousness and hope and truth who asks much of us, but who promises even more. God may ask us to turn our back on certain things, but we are assured that whatever we turn to embrace, and whatever we stand to gain, is worth so much more than the small sacrifices we will make.

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 21.

So, as the angel says, do not be afraid. The babe in the manger is inviting you into a new life, inviting you to follow a new path, asking you to pursue a different kind of light, a different kind of reward. Whatever journey God has in store for you, it may begin under sealed orders. In the beginning, you may not know how to fulfill your calling, where it will take you, or what it may require of you. But one thing is assured: if you answer the call, if you embrace what is being asked of you, God will be with you every step of the way... doors you never knew existed will be opened to you... and you will be blessed beyond measure.  
***Amen.***