

“Do Not Be Afraid!”

Isaiah 7: 10-16, Matthew 1: 18-25

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“Do not be afraid!”

In my experience, whenever someone utters those four words, I am instantly shaking in my boots. Why tell me not to fear when fear is my most likely response? I would much more appreciate an angel telling me “Be Afraid...but do not worry!” We don’t ordinarily associate fear with Christmas, however throughout the accounts of the Incarnation, everyone is afraid. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, even King Herod is terrified by the birth of this child. The birth of a baby is supposed to bring hope and joy. Why then are so many people afraid?

The more you understand about this story, the more frightened you become. There is nothing typical about the nativity. We know the story well; however much of it should not necessarily cause us to be afraid. Certainly not finding a safe place to give birth to a child might cause one to fear. Certainly being told you are pregnant by the Holy Spirit might cause one to fear. Certainly hearing that your betrothed is going to have a child and you are not the father might cause one to fear. The thought of God taking on the form of a human and dwelling among us should at least give us reason to pause, if not to fear.

Today we focus our attention on Joseph. Matthew’s gospel tells us how Joseph came to know about the impending birth of Jesus. There was no pregnancy test where Mary and Joseph anxiously await the appearance of one blue line or two. There was no “honey I have some news for you” discussion between the two of them. In fact, Mary did not break this wonderful news to her beloved. We are not sure exactly how Joseph hears about Mary’s pregnancy. Mathew says that when Mary was engaged to Joseph but before they lived together, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. We don’t know how this information gets to Joseph, only that Joseph is aware of this incredible turn of events.

Joseph is a bit bewildered about the news of Mary’s pregnancy. After all, there is no earthly way this could be. Mary and Joseph are betrothed to each other, but have not yet married. They have not yet consummated their relationship, so Joseph knows beyond a reasonable doubt that if this is true, he is not the father. Joseph finds himself in a precarious situation: he’s involved in Mary’s pregnancy, but not as one might expect. Legally, the baby is his however; he is not the father. Mary is not yet his wife, so there is still time to dismiss her and avoid any public scandal. If Joseph tells others what he knows, that Mary is pregnant by someone other than himself, she could possibly be stoned to death (along with the person who helped create this situation). We hear how Mary pondered these things in her heart when she received the news of her pregnancy. Now it is Joseph’s turn to ponder these things in his heart.

I can imagine Joseph lying awake at night wondering where things could have gone wrong. How could Mary let this happen? Why would she risk putting their families in such a perilous position? What does it mean that the child is from the Holy Spirit? No one gets pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Joseph finally resolves to do what any respectable man would do. He decides to dismiss Mary quietly.

Before Joseph has time to act on his decision, God sends an angel to speak to him a word of peace and grace. The angel greets Joseph by saying, "Do not be afraid." Before he can act too hastily, this angel tells Joseph that God has other plans for him and Mary. There is no need to worry; no need to dismiss Mary as he intends. This child she carries is from the Holy Spirit. He should take Mary as his wife and raise the child as his own. The angel instructs Joseph to name him "Jesus," for he will "save his people from their sins." Whose people? What people will a little baby save? How is a child capable of such things, Joseph wonders. It all sounds pretty ridiculous. People have waited for centuries for a promised Messiah and now the angel declares that this unborn child will be the one they have been waiting for. It will happen to Mary, as the prophet Isaiah declared long ago, "look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

Matthew says that when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. Just like that; without question or hesitation. That is how it happens when you realize you receive a word from the Lord. To the outside world your response seems unimaginable, perhaps even ludicrous. To those without your experience you appear a bit foolish by what you have agreed to do. We can relate to Joseph's proposal to dismiss Mary quietly. However, few of us would agree to accept what has happened without question and raise this child as our own. We can not understand why Joseph would agree to accept the shame and ridicule that would accompany this act of compassion. Joseph however, makes the holy decision, the just decision, and the one he could ultimately live with because God has assured him, "do not be afraid."

So often fear keeps us from doing what we know are the right things to do. Fear keeps us from listening to the holy voice that assures us, everything will be all right. Joseph models for us what happens when we do not succumb to fear, when we are brave enough to believe that despite evidence to the contrary, things will be alright. I know you don't understand it right now, but things will be all right. I know that you don't have the answers you think you need, but things will be all right. I know you thought that your life was going to turn out differently, but things will be all right. Things will be all right because God is with you. God will send someone to help you make it through this challenge that lies before you. There will be someone to listen or hold your hand or offer advice or accompany you to where you need to go. There will be someone to help you see things in a new way, to take a different path, to love you when others judge you, to help you take a deep breath when that is what will make things better. Every time I hear this story, I am more and more amazed. Joseph's response is amazing. Mary's calm resolve and assurance at such a young age are amazing too, but the fact that God would choose to come to be among us, as one of us, as Emmanuel, is the most amazing thing of all.

What we hear in Matthew's account is more than just another side to an amazing story. What we hear is God's invitation to be like Mary and Joseph, to become God-bearers as well. There would be no incarnation if Mary did not say yes, if Joseph did not support her in this decision. The whole story of the incarnation hinges on the courage and resolve of both Mary and Joseph. God invites us to participate in the Incarnation. God sends to us all a savior. This child will be a sign to the world that God is near. This child will remind us that God is always present to us in the least likely one, in the least likely ways, at the least likely times. Whether we expect it or not, whether we understand it or not, God is there. Our job is to be as faithful as Mary and Joseph whether or not we understand what is happening. Because the miracle of the Incarnation isn't about understanding, it is about faith.

As we gather for worship throughout the Advent season, we begin by lighting the candles on the Advent wreath. The candles symbolize peace, hope, joy and love. This year in our Wednesday school class we have lit these four candles as well. As we lit each candle we asked each other, "where this week have you experienced peace, where have you seen hope, what has been joyful for you, or in what ways have you given or received love?" To some people their answers may seem remarkably unprofound. However, they remind me that in our families and in our schools and in our church, God is with us every moment of our lives leading us into simple moments filled with peace, hope, joy and love. When a mother and daughter make peace after a fight, they experience the peace of Christ. When a mom makes her daughters tea and brings them cookies while they study for a pre-vacation exam, they share God's love. When young people giggle at the sight of friends returning home from college to be with them at Wednesday School again, they experience profound joy. When a family that is grieving has the courage to share the story of their son's death on the front page of the Hartford Courant in a season when so many others share hope, joy and love, we all experience the incarnation of God's love in a truly transformative way.

The angel says to Joseph, "You will call him Jesus because he will save his people," not on that night in Bethlehem, but as his life unfolded he would become the savior God intended him to be. Perhaps like Mary and Joseph you can not understand the vision God has for you at this moment, but it will come to be as God intends. We need only to trust in the power of love that led God to send Jesus to be our Emmanuel, God with us. God is here, not only when we are feeling good about ourselves, but also when we are feeling our worst, with us not only when we rejoice, but more importantly when we mourn. Not only when we are sure we have made the right decision, but when we are still uncertain what it is we have agreed to do. God is with us. Do not be afraid. You are never alone. When Joseph awakes from his dream, his fear is gone, and he can step into his future in faith. May we have the courage to be like Joseph, uncertain of what might lie ahead, but certain that God will be in it, with us, every step of the way? May it be so! Amen.