

**Advent 3: More Joy
Angels Among Us: Do not be Afraid
Dec 11th, 2022**

For the past two weeks, we've heard the angels say, "do not be afraid". Zechariah hears these words, Mary hears these words, and this week Joseph will hear the same words, "do not be afraid." And perhaps no one needed to hear it more than Joseph.

What was happening to him was a life-altering event and not one for the better, based on his culture. As a man at that time, he had every right to abandon Mary and preserve his honour when he learned of her pregnancy.

Then an angel's message of encouragement became a way to see a difficult circumstance not with dread, but with joy.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 1: 18-25

REFLECTION

Last week the passage about Mary's angel visitation was long, detailed and intertwined with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth's visitation. By comparison, the story Matthew shares with us is barebones telling and even with an angelic messenger is a little lack luster.

The reason for this is that is because we skip the first 18 lines of Chapter one. If you're familiar with The first chapter of Mathew you'll know we skip it for good reason. If you're not, let me tell you we skip them for good reason.

The first 18 lines of Matthew's gospel is an account of Jesus' genealogy, name after name of fathers and mothers starting with Abraham and the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, through King David to Joseph. 42 generations of people, most of whom have names we can't pronounce. Perez the father of Hezron, Aminadab, Zerubabel, Zadok and Eliakim - I've practiced all week.

And for modern listeners, this list of names doesn't mean much to us. We don't know these people. Imagine being shown a dozen or more photos from someone else's family reunion. Here's aunt Betty with the second cousin once removed Joe, and that's my great uncle roger who's married to Dorothy, whose sister married great uncle Roger's 1st cousin Dan. Meaningless. Who are these people and why should we care?

The listeners of Matthews Gospel know who these people are, and they know why they should care.

Often, people ask me to explain the contradictions in the bible. Why does one gospel say this and another say that? Why is God like this in one book and like that in another? How can you believe in a book that regularly contradicts itself?

And the answer is really quite simple and brilliant. All the books of the bible were written over 1000's of year to drastically different societies and cultures. When the canon of the bible became fixed, rather than edit it all to make it consistent the theologians of the time allowed the differences to remain to show us that the relationship God has with humanity can and does change over time.

In the case of the gospels each gospel was written at a slightly different time after Jesus died and to a very different audience. This is made very clear in the 2 birth narratives of Jesus.

Luke is writing to a primarily gentle audience. New Christians who did not grow up in the Jewish Faith. These new Christians were predominantly from the poor and low status members of society, with a few rich 1% as well. So, he focuses on equity and social justice for the marginalized. New Christians, at this time, regardless of their status we're on the margins because of their membership to this illegal religion. So Luke's birth narrative has low status characters - Mary, Elizabeth, the shepherds, a barn as a birth place.

Matthew is different because Matthew is writing to an audience of New Christians who grew up Jewish. All of Matthews's gospel is peppered with references that imply Jesus is the new Moses. Everything they ascribed to Moses is now transferred to Jesus.

And The genealogy of Jesus, through Joseph goes even further. It contains a star-studded list of who's who in Jewish history.

We have here the best and the brightest: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Tamar, Rahab, Boaz and Ruth, Jesse and his son King David, Uriah's wife Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, the prophets Hezekiah, Amos, Josiah and at the climax of this list - *Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

Matthew is letting everyone know that Jesus comes from a line of powerful and amazing people, therefore he is destined for greatness too. It's in his genes.

The list is 42 generations long. It builds and builds as the names are read out, you can imagine a red carpet of famous and infamous people strutting past in their best clothes and smiling faces. Kings and Prophets, Patriarchs and devoted women. These people loyal and noble, proud followers of God all. Imagine the reader of these names voice rising in pitch, getting faster and faster as more and more of these names are read out and the excitement of being in the room with all these hero's mount and then,

You have to stop and catch your breath and wonder at this man - *Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. What fascinating and intriguing things will he do in keeping with his ancestors?*

Well he finds out his wife is pregnant and he's not the father so being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, plans to quietly dismiss her.

Being a righteous man plans to quietly dismiss her.

Oh, Joseph. We can get a little self-righteous at this point in the story. I know I can. I've shared before that I've never really liked Joseph for this reason, and we like to roll our eyes at this line and I can hear a number of you muttering to yourselves, *men*.

We certainly wouldn't behave that way. We wouldn't treat a wife this way. We're modern and we've learned.

And then we like to say, Joseph was a product of his time and society. That was common practice and hey - look he doesn't go through with it. He stays with her in the end. It takes a vision of an angel from God to make up his mind, but he's a good person.

But, if you're like me, you kinda like to hold on to the self-righteous notion, *but he thought about it*.

I don't partially like that about myself, but I've always heard that line in this passage spoken of that way, so it's really hard to shift my thinking. I'm working on it.

As some of you know this story is my Call to Ordination story. Spending time with Joseph, despite my reluctance to do so, helped me answer my call to ministry. It was during the spiritual practice of 'who are you in the story?' at the beginning of Advent, 2018. Who was I in the story? Mary, ready to bring forth new beginnings? An Animal, finding love in ordinary places?

Nope. Joseph. I was Joseph, the man who I resented for being a human being in a profoundly honour-bound society. A man I resented for wanting to leave his wife to save his own face.

He had a lot to lose, truth be told. His status, livelihood and the honour of any future children were at stake. We don't really understand the power that honour/shame societies have over their members, but that's what we're looking at here. Honour is everything, if you don't have honour, you are worth less than nothing.

And Joseph was scared to lose face, to lose his honour and the honour bestowed upon him by his ancestry, as listed in the verses previously. For the readers of Matthew Joseph's actions to do this quietly was the most honourable course of action at the

same time as it was shocking. He would have been well within his rights to publicly shame Mary for her behaviour which would elevate his status while reducing hers.

His unwillingness to bring shame on Mary might have brought gasps from the audience and possibly tears to the eyes of the women listening - here is a doubly honourable man. He'll save face and attempt to make sure Mary saves face too.

And then everything changes. An angel appears and tells Joseph not to be afraid, Mary's baby is conceived of the Holy Spirit and this baby will save his people.

We're not told in the story if Joseph was perplexed by this message, as Mary was. It appears given the lack of narrative detail that he accepts this without batting an eye.

I'm not so sure this is true. I can't really imagine this being an easy message for anyone to hear. And that's where my own interpretation comes in. For me, as I was imagining myself as Joseph in the story, I could hear Joseph saying in response to the angel - *"this isn't what I signed up for. This isn't the life I wanted. I want a quiet life with my family. Asking me to be the parent to the Messiah - that's too much for me, I can't do that, I can't do it. I don't want it, please take it away."*

And for me that was my exact response to being called to Ordination. *Who me? You must be mistaken and mean someone else.*

But the Angel says to Joseph, *yes you, don't be afraid. God is with you. You will name your child Emmanuel which means -God is With Us.*

And on that day in 2018, I heard the angel saying those same words to me - *God is with you.*

So Joseph finds the courage to stand up and risk the loss of face by not turning Mary away. He decides to say ok, yes! to God and to Mary and too the child yet to be born.

In doing so he challenges all the notions of this honour/shame society he lives in, risking unending shame for all his life. Yet somehow, because of God, his actions are the most honourable of all the honourable men (and women) from whom he is a descendent.

Now we can imagine that star-studded red-carpet line of ancestors turning back towards Joseph at the end of the line and with their glittering smiles they all raise a cheer and clap with joy for the honour that Joseph is bringing to all of them through his actions and the joy he will bring to all the world through his son.

On this third Sunday in Advent, we see a person turning fear into hope, upheaval into peace and dread into Joy.

I am sure that even after Joseph said yes to his call, he felt moments of great fear and dread. We'll read later in Matthew of great upheaval in the lives of him and his family.

But what I want to believe about Joseph, what I want to hold on to, is despite his fear, despite all the unknowns he faced he trusted God enough to say yes. To say, ok I will do this. As we come up against our own fears and upheavals in life, I hope we can remember Joseph as a brave and noble man who did the right thing because he trusted God to be with him.

May it be so,
Amen