

“Get Up and Go: #morelife”

January 7, 2018

Angels Among Us series

Joseph dreamed another dream (and then another!), and it brings us to the dark and messy side of Christmas. Talking about the death of infants and genocide just after welcoming the birth of baby Jesus is not good news. I struggle to know why only Joseph had a dream to flee - and just how many children died because of Herod's complete disregard for human life?

And yet, in the midst of a story of a Savior's birth, that's what we have. A power-hungry king who sends out a mandate that all of these infants be killed because he can't figure out where this infant king is (because the magi never returned to tell him!).

This isn't good news we want to hear. And I can't imagine Joseph wanted to hear it either. “Get up and go” was the messenger's word to Joseph. Get up, take Jesus and Mary, and go to Egypt because Jesus' life is in grave danger. Stay there until you hear from me again. Anxiety, uncertainty, worry, and incredible fear.

How many of us can relate to the desire to keep our family safe? For those who have cared for an infant, how many questions there are about what to do and how to do it? Am I doing this right? And I know it doesn't end because I'm still asking my mom, sisters, and friends if I'm doing this right. I know it doesn't end because older adults still want to protect and help their children.

And certainly Joseph's situation is different than mine or yours, but Joseph might be much more fearful. He already responded to God's call to be Jesus' earthly father, but now he has the fuller picture of what it means - even to protect Jesus from life-threatening violence.

And though I can't imagine anything close to this, there are people even now who know Joseph's struggle intimately. It might seem surreal to us, but there are those who experience the slaughter of the innocents every day - child abuse and neglect, trafficking, online predators, gun violence, and the rest.

And though we're talking about young children here, we see the effect of hatred and violence because of race, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity - a lack of respect for life and an unwillingness to see one another as beloved children of God. We see the effects of greed, indifference, and economic disparity that destroy lives. This story isn't so far removed from us when we stop and think.

I invite you to see a short video from our larger UMC around the reality of refugees and global migration. **SHOW “The Migrant”**

65 million displaced persons - many of them children - because of ethnic and religious persecution, natural disasters, violence, war, conflict and terror, hunger and poverty, lack of economic opportunity.

We know the news stories, but think of it! 65 million people - that's more than at any other time since World War II. We've heard of the plight of many Syrians. There are the Rohingya leaving Myanmar (Bangladesh). But all of the other issues that cause people to flee and seek new life, too. Often we forget that Jesus' early life is one of a refugee - displaced because of the threat of violence and forced to flee to a new place.

Joseph's dream was a call to action, but it was also a reminder of God's presence. God had already made a way and would be with them as they went. Our larger church is responding to the needs around the world, but it's not easy work. It's not easy for people to enter a new community and find good support. And yet we have a call from God to welcome the stranger in the name of Jesus.

In our Advent and Christmas season, we've focused on how we stand against the overwhelming sense of fear that's so prevalent in our world - how we both experience and offer more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love. Today we're called to consider how we offer more life - how we give life to others in the name of the One who came to give us eternal life.

Joseph doesn't get the introduction of "do not be afraid" here. With the message, Joseph would certainly have a sense of fear! Again, just as we said about the magi who avoided Herod and took another way home, being a part of Jesus' story wasn't without fear and trembling. Joseph stands against earthly power and authority and trusts God to lead him and his family to a safe place.

Where are you and I called to offer more life? Who comes to your mind when you think of someone who needs to know the power of grace and forgiveness that God provides? Where can we usher in more life - and like Joseph - stand against destruction, hatred, and violence?

Joseph was called to get up and go. Sometimes we can be complacent. We decide that problems are too big and too overwhelming to even consider how we might tackle them. We can become apathetic about the needs of the world. *What I do won't matter, so why bother? What's one person going to do to change anything?*

But that's where I'm so grateful for the power of a congregation, a community of churches, or the church around the world. We can do so much together that we can't do alone. And each one of us can "get up and go" for God's sake - letting go of what holds us back so that we can find new life with God. Parker Palmer says, "...looking for what I want to give myself to transforms everything. It's taking me to a place where I find energy, trust, and new life."

Some of us serve meals, stock pantries that feed and clothe people, read to kids, work with kids, pack lunches for kids, make beds for Family Promise, visit older friends, serve on a committee or team with others that helps the church make disciples, welcome people who come to see relatives at Hospice House, and the list goes on. Maybe you've been thinking about trying something new, serving in a new way, stepping out in faith, getting up and going because of God's nudge. Well, friends, it's time.

All of us can be messengers of more life in Jesus' name, but it requires that we respond to God's call. That's what we've heard all along. Yes, we love the image of angels, but the people who heard these messengers responded! I hope that we've paid closer attention to the angels among us and been more willing to call them out in our lives, but I also hope that we see ourselves as God's messengers, too.

Yes, I believe there are angels among us because I know you. We can be messengers, flying in the face of fear, saying no to the destruction of life and wellbeing wherever we see it - and saying "yes" to God who calls us to offer hope, peace, joy, and love - to bring new life in his name. Friends, God is counting on us. God needs us. God needs you to be a messenger.

May we live as those who hope and trust in God's grace and power, even in the most terrible circumstances. May we believe that love wins, that love is stronger than death, even when it seems impossible. May we dare to hope for and work for peace in our lives and in the world. May the angels' songs keep on pointing us to the deeper truth that we're called to share - that God is with us, even in the messy stuff.

Joy Carroll Wallis says, "This story that begins in a smelly barn finally ends on a cross. By human standards it is a message of weakness. But Christmas reminds us that our God has come into our broken world, and that human judgments are not the last judgment, human justice is not the last justice. The power that humans exercise over us is not the last power."

More life. May God help us. Amen.

Let's pray together as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table:

As we close our series this day, we affirm our commitment to being messengers of hope, peace, joy, love and life throughout this year. Let us sing our closing song: Here I Am, Lord (#593).

*Blessing

Look again at the Christ candle and remember that Christ is our Life. Let's proclaim to one another the message we must take to the world:

Do not be afraid (4x)

Mission to the Messengers - SHOW SLIDE

So I'm inviting you to share our quote meme for the week from our church Facebook page to your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat accounts and hashtag it #morejoy. If you're not into social media, I invite you to share these words with someone: write it down and mail it to someone, give it to someone, take a photo of it and send it in a message—whatever you can do in whatever channels of communication are available to you:

“tweet” - God gave us the gift of life; it is up to us to give ourselves the gift of living well. (Voltaire) *#morelife #donotbeafraid*