

“Do Not Be Afraid: #morejoy”

December 17, 2017

Angels Among Us series – 3rd Sunday of Advent

Joseph is a man of few words in the Gospels. You’ll notice that Matthew is the one who picks up Joseph’s story right after a long list of the connections between Jesus and those who have come before. We know Jesus is the Son of God, and so his biological connections may not matter so much, but it seems to matter to Matthew who wanted to make the connection clear between Jesus and the Hebrews.

But right away, you might notice that Joseph’s lineage includes some surprising names including three named women - Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth - a reference to Bathsheba and then Mary’s name. The writer is clear to make the connection from Abraham to King David to Joseph, but it’s interesting that these other names are included. Perhaps it’s a sign of things to come.

You see, Joseph doesn’t say much, but Joseph’s lineage includes some folks who might not “fit the mold” for what we’d assume would be proper when we’re talking about the birth of Jesus. In Genesis 38, Tamar’s story is one of grit and getting what she wants from her father-in-law, Judah. You can look it up, and I promise it’s juicy.

You might remember that Rahab is a prostitute who helps the Hebrew spies in the book of Joshua. She saves herself and her family in the process, but she’s certainly not someone you’d expect to get any mention when we’re talking about Jesus.

And Ruth is mentioned, too. Ruth the Moabite - not a Hebrew woman - who stays with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and shows great strength and faith. She’s King David’s grandmother.

Bathsheba gets slight mention, although not directly. She is Solomon’s mother, though King David basically took her for his own while he sent her husband, Uriah, to fight.

I remind us of this partly because we usually skip right to Joseph’s side of the story when we see all of those names in Matthew. No one wants to read them for fear of mispronouncing anything, but who’s included is important. And I wonder if it’s because Matthew is trying to tell us that things will be interesting, unexpected, and even a little strange for Joseph.

Let’s be honest: Joseph in a tough place. He’s in a scary place. It’s enough to strike fear and worry in any of us. Obviously he and Mary have a connection. In their culture, they are in the second part of a three-part marriage ritual. First, there was the engagement, which sometimes happened even before the bride and groom were old enough to make their own decision.

Then, there was the betrothal when the engagement was ratified, which is where they are. A couple was locked into marriage, but they weren't intimate with one another – that lasted for a year. And finally, the marriage itself with a festival to celebrate. But even in the betrothal period, the only way to get out of it was through a divorce that was witnessed by two people.

So Joseph has the power and the choice. We're told that he wanted to divorce Mary, but he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace. He has every right to do what the Law says - to push the Law to its fullest extent - but he chooses not to do that.

The Gospel writer calls Joseph "righteous," which is a term from archery. It carries the sense of having "right aim" before God. "Righteous" might mean following the Law like a faithful Jew would, but somehow there's a sense that "righteousness" means loving God and loving others even stepping back from what the Law dictates or allows.

So Joseph has made up his mind. He'll break it off as quietly as he can.

And then the angel comes in a dream. And the first words to Joseph after the angel says his name? Say it with me: *DO NOT BE AFRAID*. And it's directed at Joseph's fear - *don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife*. Then there's more explanation about how this child came to be in Mary's womb.

Just like Zechariah, Joseph receives a name for his son from the angel. But he receives even more. He receives the message that the name will be the message and the mission: Jesus will save the people from their sins. And there's a reference to Isaiah's prophecy about Emmanuel - God is with us.

So Joseph's pedigree is far from perfect. If we're honest, this whole situation is far from perfect. Yes, I'm sure people whispered about Mary, but Joseph would've been subject to gossip and ridicule, too.

The Law said that he should tell everyone that Mary was pregnant. She'd be an adulteress and could be stoned without a second thought. But even before Jesus' birth, we see the beginnings of what Jesus will do through Joseph's actions. There's an incredible sense of grace in Joseph's actions. Instead of going along with the written Law that told him to expose Mary, Joseph plans to spare her.

As we're focusing on the angels of Jesus' birth story and the angels among us now, we've been talking about how we stand against the pervasive sense of fear in our world. Hope is God's gift against fear that can drive us to despair. Peace is God's gift against fear that can make us stay focused on *what if?* (which can lead us to live in denial of the reality around us) rather than dealing with *what is*.

Joseph's encounter with the angel and his actions remind us that joy isn't simply happiness; it's much more than that. Someone said, "Joy is not the absence of sorrow,

but the presence of God.” Joy is one more of God’s gifts - along with hope and peace - that helps us to stand against fear. Without joy - that deep down assurance of God’s presence, faithfulness, and love - we live with constant worry. At a time when Joseph is no doubt facing incredible worry and fear, his dream and the angel’s role in it is to intervene and help him move forward with trust in God’s salvation story.

Our worries may be different than Joseph’s, but they are worries all the same. Maybe yours center around trying to make this holiday “perfect” - or at least less disastrous than a previous year. Maybe, for you, it’s about getting back to basics and fighting the temptation to get too busy rather than anticipating and welcoming God in the flesh.

If you’re on social media, maybe you’re more anxious when you see what everyone else is doing - parties, family time, relaxing - and the way that we can make life appear more perfect than it really is. Maybe it’s difficult to give up on perfect and move forward trusting God’s grace to lead even in the midst of deep grief, health struggles, or uncertainty in the world.

Another part of the whole story that we don’t hear is how Joseph comes to Mary after his dream. All we hear is that he did what the angel said to do - he took Mary as his wife and named the baby as instructed. But I wonder what he said and what she said. Consider how Joseph became another messenger who offered encouragement to Mary in a time of great need. I can’t imagine how much his support meant to her and how his message of Jesus’ special birth affirmed what she knew to be true. I can only imagine how both of them felt joy.

Joy is a product of grace. Joy comes from receiving grace. Joy really is a gift that we cannot earn or deserve. It’s not a goal we pursue, but a gift that we receive from God. One person says that joy is “grace recognized.”

Joy isn’t based on our present circumstances. In fact, joy has more to do with perseverance and trust when things aren’t going quite right. We cannot find true joy in stuff or circumstances or experiences – no matter how hard we try.

It’s not that God doesn’t want us to be happy. God created us and desires the best for us. But God knows that we can’t really find joy – that deep-down assurance – anywhere except in God. We find joy in God.

However, being joyful doesn’t mean that we don’t pay attention to what’s going on in our lives or in the world. We face what’s before us with honesty. We don’t ignore natural disasters or the reality of violence around us. We don’t offer empty words when people are struggling or grieving. Joy doesn’t mean that we overlook the pain and tragedy around us. In fact, joy really comes out of sorrow.

Walt Wangerin, Jr. says, “The difference between shallow happiness and a deep, sustaining joy is sorrow. Happiness lives where sorrow is not. When sorrow arrives, happiness dies. It can't stand pain. Joy, on the other hand, rises from sorrow and therefore can withstand all grief.”

Wangerin goes onto relate this to the progression that Paul lifts up in Romans 5. Suffering produces endurance, endurance – character, character – hope. That hope contributes to our joy, and it doesn't disappoint us. This is a challenging concept! Joy comes when we have a sense of God's presence and power, when we can face struggle and uncertainty knowing that God is beside us, when we allow ourselves to reach out to others and recognize our connection to God and one another.

So maybe it's hard to see the connection at first, but Joseph and joy go together. He had to embrace the message he received and walk with God (and Mary). He had to overcome the fear of worry to bring more joy to the world.

So what will we do to bring more joy? How will we listen to God's message to be a part of transforming the world?

I believe there are angels among us. We can be messengers of joy, flying in the face of fear, because God, Emmanuel, is truly with us.

May God help us. Amen.

Prayers of the People

BEFORE last hymn - **HAND OUT BELLS:**

When you hear “Joy to the World” this week, stop for a moment and remember the reason for this season. We can know joy right now, even in the midst of fear. For God desires so much to be with and for humanity that God sent Jesus, Emmanuel, and this Spirit continues with us.

Let's sing together #246...

Mission to the Messengers - SHOW SLIDE

Every week we have a mission if we choose to accept it. It is a mission with a message. So I'm inviting you to be “hashtaggers of joy” and 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:

Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow; it only saps today of its joy. (Leo Buscaglia) #morejoy #donotbeafraid

Look again at the candles of hope, peace, and joy. Let's proclaim the message we must take to the world:

Do not be afraid (repeat 3 times)