

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Angels Among Us

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Title: Do Not Be Afraid: #MoreJoy

If anyone is easily overlooked in the Christmas story and season, I think it is Joseph. There are songs about Mary, and Jesus, the angels, the shepherds and even the wise men, but somehow Joseph is easy to miss. More often than not, we think about Luke's story of Jesus' birth which is mostly focused around Mary. The Gospels don't tell us much about Joseph and about the most we hear about him is in Matthew's story where Joseph is the central character.

Every angel seems to use "do not be afraid" as an opening line, and throughout the story, Joseph is possibly the one who most needed to hear that message. Without any consultation with him, Joseph becomes the man who is responsible for taking care of Jesus, the son of God, being responsible for his safety and that of his mother Mary, providing the day to day fathering that would help Jesus grow into the man he became, being sure there was enough food for the growing child, and shelter, education, and all of the things that a good father does.

And make no mistake about it, Joseph was a good father. How do we know? Let's put aside for a minute all the things we think we know about the Christmas story; let's put aside the way our history has brought all of the various pieces together to make it for us one cohesive account; let's stop and simply look at Matthew.

It's easy for us to forget that not everyone knew the whole Christmas story. It's easy to forget that this was happening to real people with real

lives and they did not have the benefit of reading Luke or anything else to know how it would all come out.

Joseph was a good man – a good father for Jesus. How do we know? Look at Matthew. Mary had an angel appear to her to tell her that she would become pregnant. Joseph didn't have that benefit. In all likelihood, it was Mary who told him about the pregnancy and we can assume that she would have told him about the angel's message to her, but it's a pretty hard story to buy. All Joseph really knew was that Mary was pregnant and he was not the father.

Last week I alluded to Jewish marriage customs in ancient Judaism. Marriages were usually arranged by the parents and at the engagement the groom to be made promises in front of at least two witnesses to provide a house, a living and his love. They then became legally husband and wife, although they could not sleep together until after the official ceremony. If either of them slept with someone else during this time, it would be considered adultery.

Adam Hamilton in his book, "Faithful: Christmas through the Eyes of Joseph" reminds us that the news that Joseph had received from Mary was devastating. Joseph, in all likelihood would have felt utterly betrayed and humiliated, and once it was obvious that Mary was pregnant, people were going to talk. Joseph faced a dilemma. He could do what was customary in such circumstances and call off the wedding. This would have publicly humiliated Mary and, although not often practiced, the penalty could have been death for Mary. If allowed to live, she would always be viewed in her community as a sinner, a harlot.

But Matthew tells us that's not what Joseph wanted. Even though he was undoubtedly heartbroken and felt betrayed, he decided that he would

divorce her quietly. This likely meant that he would say that he had changed his mind about the marriage, and as Mary's pregnancy became obvious, people who assume that he was the father and he would be seen as the dishonorable party in the relationship. He would take all the blame and accept the stigma and shame for himself rather than allow Mary to be forever disgraced.<sup>i</sup>

If we don't understand the marriage customs of the day, we might miss all of this in the few words that Matthew used, "Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly." (Matt 1:19)

"Think about the picture that Matthew's Gospel reveals of Joseph in those few words. Joseph had reason to believe that he had been wronged, that his fiancée had been unfaithful. At that point, Joseph hadn't yet had the dream in which the messenger of the Lord appeared to him. Despite his pain, he still felt compassion for Mary. He showed mercy, forgiveness, and grace. He felt hurt and betrayed but refused to denounce her publicly and humiliate her." As Adam Hamilton points out this is remarkable.

Into this confusion and feeling of betrayal, God sent a messenger. In Matthew's gospel the angel shows up in a dream – the first of four dreams that give important messages to Joseph and that help him to continue to be the righteous man that he has already shown himself to be.

"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." The angel confirms to Joseph what Mary has likely already told him – the baby is not the result of an adulterous affair, but is the result of God's actions, a baby who will save his people – a baby to be called Emmanuel – which means "God with us."

When I think about the messages from the angels – that almost always begin, "Do not be afraid" I am reminded that worry is often the

emotion we experience with the unknown. Today, on the Sunday that we focus on joy – I would note that worry is the opposite of joy. Worry drains our energy and prevents us from experiencing true joy.

When I think of worry, I think about an idea I read and have retold many times about the Wednesday afternoon worry club. It's really very simple – if there is something you think you should be worrying about – write it down on a piece of paper. You can't worry about it now – put it in a special box and set it aside until Wednesday afternoon. On Wednesday afternoon, it is time for the Wednesday afternoon worry club to meet. You are probably meeting by yourself and that's good. Open the box and carefully take out each piece of paper and read about the things you are supposed to be worrying about.

With each thing you read, you make a decision. Do you still need to worry about it? If the answer is no, then throw the paper away. If the answer is yes, put it in a pile with the other things you still need to worry about. After you have read everything in the box and made a decision, you will notice that the number of things to worry about has decreased.

Now, comes the really important part – the purpose of the Wednesday afternoon worry club – pick up the items that still require worrying and put them back in the box. Close the lid and put the box away until next Wednesday.

The angels word to Joseph, “Do not be afraid” reminds him and us that worrying about something is a waste of energy. While we are worrying we are not taking any action – or even considering our options. Much of what we think we need to worry about takes care of itself. Joseph could easily have worried about many things – especially with this very special child soon to be born.

The rest of the Christmas story would bear out the things that Joseph didn't even know could become causes for worry – the soon to be announced census, the difficult trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the problems finding a place to stay where Mary could safely give birth and then one of the greatest unknowns - Herod's desire to kill the child. Angels would appear to Joseph three more times in a dream to tell him about the dangers and what to do about them.

Joseph didn't need to waste energy worrying about what people would think or how he would provide for the baby, or especially how to keep the baby safe – the angels took care of that. Joseph can focus on being present to Mary and the baby. Joseph can focus on the miracle of birth and all that is happening in his life. Joseph can experience with Mary the joy of being part of God's plan for the world.

“Worry is the illusion that we can somehow prevent tomorrow's heartache. When we live in worry, we live not in the present, but our minds keep us tending an unknown future. We often miss the joy of what is occurring right now and miss opportunities to be fully present to others with our attention and support. When we are robbed of our joy, it is difficult to create more joy in the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

Remember that Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience. Throughout Matthew's gospel there is a thread reminding them of the ways that the scripture is being fulfilled. Luke wrote primarily to a Gentile audience and much of his focus is on the way God cares and provides for those who are considered the last, the lost, and the least. Luke is the one who tells us about an angel appearing to Mary and about shepherds in the field and angels singing.

Matthew deals with the plight of the Jewish people and the great hope and desire that a Messiah would come who would save them from Rome. For his readers, who were different than Luke's, the angel's appearance is how they discover the divine purpose of this pregnancy.

Messages that intervene into human history is an important focus here. Throughout history there have been people who have cast a vision or spoken the truth to power in ways that have changed history. You can probably think about people in your lives who have changed things for you with a message, a thought, an announcement, being present in a way that said, "I care".

During this Advent season, we are invited again, to be those messengers. We are invited to be the angels for someone else. We are invited to bring a word of hope, peace, and joy to a world that is hurting.

This past week, I was at the calling hours and funeral for a member of the extended family. During the calling hours my grandchildren were present. Jacob spent most of his time coloring and reading books with his father at the back of the room. But at various times during the evening he decided that someone in the room needed a hug and he would take up toward that person to give the hug that would inevitably bring a smile to their face and to those around them.

At one point, he decided that Pepe, his great grandfather, should hear one of his books, so he and Daddy went to the casket, and kneeling there, Daddy read the story to Jacob so that Pepe could hear it. We may not all share the same perspective on this, but what I saw, was people stopping their conversations and watching Jacob at the casket sharing a story with Pepe. I saw people smiling, and understanding that death is not

the end, that life continues and that even in the sorrow around him, a child was a messenger of joy.

As our Advent candles remind us, sometimes hope, peace, and joy are small flickers in the midst of darkness, but Scripture reminds us that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5) This season, let us take a lesson from Joseph, chosen by God to be the earthly fatherly role model for Jesus, faithful in spite of potential gossip and speculation in the community, open to God’s leading enough to hear the message, “Do not be afraid.” With Joseph, let us be ready to get up and take action.

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

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<sup>i</sup> Hamilton, Adam. Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph, Loc 415 and earlier.

<sup>ii</sup> McFee, Marcia. Worship Design Studio. Sermon notes.