

## Joyful News

### Matthew 1: 18-25

As I shared in this past week's Theology Tuesday, this Sunday is known as Joy Sunday. It receives this name from the line found in Philippians 4, which says to Rejoice in the Lord always. These words are used as opening words for worship for many churches on this particular Sunday, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Normally on Joy Sunday, we hear about Mary. We read from the first chapter of Luke which tells us of her song known as the Magnificat. A beautiful prayer reminiscent of Hannah's prayer in the Old Testament, both of which celebrate God's continued work in the world, bringing about what others had deemed impossible.

But this year, as I was planning out our Advent season, knowing what all was going on in people's lives, sickness, difficult changes, broken hearts, discord around our nation and world, it wasn't Mary song to which I was drawn. Rather it was Joseph's story which captured my attention, Joseph's story which showed me a gentler, more vulnerable part of what it mean to rejoice in the Lord always. It was Joseph's story which showed me a joy which goes beyond celebration to offering comfort and strength, a joy which invites us to remember always that the

darkness does not have the last word even as the tears are streaming down our faces.

Holding this as our Truth, I invite us to hear Joseph's story as told through the Gospel of Matthew

(Read the text)

I want to give us a little background which will help us understand what is going on in this text.

“As readers we are told that Mary and Joseph are engaged, In the first century world of Joseph and Mary, this is not a romantic declaration of intent. Rather, it is a legal contract, binding in every respect. To be engaged – or espoused, betrothed, or pledged (some of the other words used in English translations) – was essentially be to married yet without having consummated that marriage or as yet living together. Which means that when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he can only conclude that she has been unfaithful to him and so likely experiences the pain, anguish, and sense of betrayal that any of us would have felt at such a devastating revelation.

In Joseph's day, there were only two realistic possibilities when faced with the possibility – or what must have seemed to Joseph as an unquestionable reality – of Mary's infidelity. He could either publicly declare his injury, in which case

Mary would likely have been stoned, or— the translation “dismiss” softens the reality as “engagement” did earlier —or he could divorce her quietly, and he chooses the latter course.” (David Lose)

Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly. This was the plan except it didn't go according to plan. As people of faith, one thing about the Biblical narrative we have learned is that when the promises of God are put in danger either through actions or inaction of humans, angels usually get involved. And they come bearing news. Now usually before this news is shared, the angel says, “Do not be Afraid.” That is the way it happened for Zechariah when he learns that he and Elizabeth will have a child. That is the way it happens for Mary when she learns that she will bear a son. That is the way it happens for the shepherds in the field when the angels come and tell them of the Savior’s birth.

But notice Joseph’s story. Notice that the angel comes to Joseph in a dream. Unlike Mary and Zechariah, even the shepherd’s experience, Joseph’s encounter with the angel is not a supernatural occurrence. The “Do Not Be Afraid” which the angel offers to Joseph is not offered in the context of the encounter. It is offered in response to Joseph’s fear and worry. The angel tells Joseph to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, that she has conceived a child by the Holy Spirit and Joseph will name him Jesus which means he will save his people from their sins.

“Joseph’s fear wasn’t because he saw a ghost... but a fear that something unrighteous was about to occur in his taking Mary as a spouse.” Joseph knows what the world expects him to do. He knows what he had planned for his life with Mary. And now, nothing is what he expected. Nothing is what he planned. And suddenly, Joseph feels lost, like his very foundation is ripped out from under his feet.

I imagine in that moment, the hurt and betrayal, the despair and disappointment Joseph must be feeling. All of what he thought he knew, all of what he thought he could trust, all of what he had expected is shattered. Yet, as I have learned, that one of the greatest lessons in life is in that moment when our world is shattered either through death, sickness, hurt, hate, any number of things, in that moment when our expectations are shattered, we pick up the pieces and we grieve. We grieve what we lost. We grieve what we had hoped would become reality. We grieve for what we had planned. And then...and then we lift up the pieces that still resonate as Truth, that still give us life, that still hold promise because in those pieces are where we find God’s love and grace, two things which never ever disappoint or fail us.

In his dream, Joseph comes face to face with the Kingdom of God and even though it is not how he planned for things to work out, he enters into this new life laid out before him. Through an invitation to put aside all his fears, by embracing

Mary as his wife, Joseph now becomes part of the work of bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

You see, the thing we miss every time we read Joseph's story is that is not really about the birth of Jesus. It is about the people, people who were living in uncertain times, facing uncertain circumstances. It is about people who were called to place their trust in God, people who were called on to find the strength and the courage to hold onto the hope found in the promises of God. This story is the true and vulnerable reality about people, people just like you and me, who have experienced, who continue to experience a way out of the darkness, people who have come to know the love and grace of God.

Joseph's story is about real people with real challenges, like you and me. Because in it, we hear once again, that, in the midst of all the hurt, all the brokenness, in the midst of all the fears and worries which are surrounding us right now, we don't need to let disappoint be what defines us. We do not need to let unfilled expectations be what shapes our faith. We do not need to be afraid to act in ways which goes against what the world considers right.

Because ultimately as people of faith, we know the rest of the story. We know that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,

nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We know that God is at work in this world bringing about what others had deemed impossible.

And for all of us, this is the joyful news we need to hear right now. While the rest of the world is filled with false light and forced cheer, we as people of faith are reframing our stories from sorrow into joy because we know that even when life becomes not what we planned or expected, as people of faith, we know God is with us always. We do not need to be afraid.

Again, please hear me say, this Joy Sunday is not a command to pretend that everything is okay because in reality, sometimes we are so overwhelmed with the hurt and hate which fills our world, which fills our communities, which fills our hearts that we do wonder where is God in all it. Rather it is my hope that we all experience this Joy Sunday is an invitation, an invitation to choose life even if it is not the life we had planned or expected.

Because we know that our joy as people of faith is a proclamation, an annunciation if you will, just like it was for Hannah, just like it was for Mary, just like it was for Joseph as well. Our joy is an annunciation that God is still at work in this world, that we know the empty tomb will not have the last word, that our

brokenness, our hurt, our sorrow will be transformed into joy in the morning.

Thanks be to God. Amen.