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Angels Among Us: Joseph-Do Not Be Afraid - JOY

Intro to Worship

In this Advent season, as we're preparing our hearts to celebrate Christmas, we've been reflecting on the angels that turn up in the stories of Jesus' birth. Whether we believe in angels with feathered wings or imagine instead angels like our neighbor sitting next to us in the pew, we refer to those that bear God's message of hope and joy in the midst of troubling times.

The angels in our story each begin with a similar message... "Do not be afraid." Joseph certainly needed to hear these words, as he wrestles with how to respond to the news of his fiancé's pregnancy. But the angel's message of encouragement was to see this difficult circumstance not with dread, but with joy. As we learn more about Joseph, may our hearts and minds be open to explore where we might set aside fear, as we embrace the joy and hope in our lives.

Let us join our voices in this song about the coming of the one called Emmanuel, who reminds us that whatever we face in this life, God IS WITH US.

Matthew 1: 18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reading scripture is a complicated thing... especially when we come across texts like these from our Christmas story. We read about things that we know in our mind defies science and logical explanation, like angels and virgin births, but since they're in scripture, some would ask us to believe them as fact. For us, progressive Christians, who are not made to check our minds at the door, we're challenged then to read deeper into the text to uncover the subtext... the deepest meaning of the stories. As we wrestle with what the author was trying to say in the writing, and what meaning the first readers took from these stories, we can then explore what meaning we can take from them. So, what is it that we can learn of this story of Joseph wrestling with how to handle his fiancé's unexpected pregnancy.

In Mary and Joseph's day, to be engaged was like being married – a formal contract had been signed, and the parties could not end an engagement without a divorce. Upon discovering Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is faced with a decision... should he stay or should he go? Actually, it doesn't even seem like he considers staying at first... We're told he rejects the Biblical option of stoning, prescribed in Deuteronomy 22 as the punishment for adultery, choosing to save Mary from public humiliation and harm by dismissing her privately.

Our scripture presents this as the kind option, the compassionate option... but still at the end of the day, it leaves Mary as a single mom in a patriarchal society where women struggled to make their own way without a man's protection and support. Could she do it, yes, I'm sure... but it would have been infinitely more challenging to raise her son! While Joseph's decision to dismiss Mary quietly was kinder than the other options, it was still based on fear and self-preservation... fear of the unknown, fear of what people would say about him and this child.

In Joseph's decision to dismiss Mary, he has done what most of us tend to do: make decisions with our head, rather than our heart. When we're trying to reason through something, we perform thorough research, gathering all the information, thinking through all the possible outcomes, rather than delving into our emotions and hopes for the future. Joseph has all the information he needs and has figured out the best course of action. He goes to bed having decided what he will do. But then, as the story goes, once asleep, God's messenger shows up: in that unguarded moment of sleep—when Joseph's mind cannot override the message.

The angel – God's spokesperson-- fills in blanks Joseph did not even know were there. It's as if the angel is saying "Joseph you think she broke the contract, but there is something going on that you couldn't even imagine!" And the angel reaches back to Isaiah's prophecy, a profound ancient witness to God's presence with God's people, to make the argument stick.

Isaiah's passage, about "Emmanuel, God with us," was written at a time when the nation was facing a significant international threat. Two neighboring powers were vying for

supremacy, threatening to invade, and the king of Israel, Ahaz, thought that maybe if they aligned with one of the nations, they'd be safe.

Amidst Ahaz's fear and information processing, the prophet Isaiah comes with a word from God saying, "Just relax... take a breath. Don't ally yourself with either of these nations... everything is going to be OK. To keep you calm and trusting, I'll send a sign: there is a young woman who is pregnant, and before the child she gives birth to is weaned, the threat from these two neighboring nations will be over. This will be my way of telling you I, God, am with you." Emmanuel!

In Isaiah's time it was a sign given so that the people could manage their anxiety. Set aside their fear and trust that God was with them in this precarious time. In its original setting it was a word of incredible hope and evidence of God's abiding love for the people. This prophecy is a promise that God will indeed rescue the people from all that endangers them, they do not need to scramble for an alternative way out.

This passage tells us that God is really with us—right here, right now. God is not waiting till life is as it should be, or waiting till we accomplish becoming what we are trying to become, but rather is with us as we are, now, in this moment.

With this bigger context in mind, now listen to the immense promises this angel so subtly offers to Joseph in his dream:

"Do not be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. For God is with you."

Don't be afraid... don't let your fear of the unknown and the unplanned steal your joy. You obviously care about Mary, since you've decided to save her from public ridicule and harm... don't let your fear keep you from a life of joy with her and this child.

Too often, when our decision making is based solely in the mind, rather than the heart, we allow fear and worry to seep in and guide our thoughts. Worry is the illusion that we can somehow prevent tomorrow's heartache. When we live in worry, our minds are focused on some unknown future, rather than living into the now. We often miss the joy of what is happening right in front of us, missing the 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.

I wonder how our lives would be different... how our world would be different if we could set aside our fear and worry and trust that God is with us through it all. I imagine there would be a whole lot more JOY in the world! I imagine that we would move away from living out of our fear of scarcity, and move into a spirit of abundance, recognizing that there IS enough to share... there IS enough time, love, money, and resources to not hold so fiercely to our cut...

As you go into your week, into the final push before Christmas, I invite you to notice your fears and worries... to hold them in prayer, offering them to God. I invite you to hear the angel's words spoken into your situations... into your fears... "Do not be afraid. God is with

you." As you give your fears and worries over to God, I pray that you may be freed up to live in the moment... to experience the joy of relationships, the joy found in simple things like a smile, a hug, a long-time friendship, or memories shared. That you might know the joy of generosity and hope in the future. As we offer our fears to God, may we be able to trust that God is with us, and will see us through, even the most challenging situations, pouring out more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love into our hearts and lives each day. Amen.