

Radiant Joy
Matthew 1:18-25
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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.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

What's the first thing the angel says when he appears to Joseph? It's what angels usually say when they appear to human beings in the Bible. I assume it's what any human being seeing an angel would need to hear first—"Don't be afraid."

We preachers spend days thinking about and studying the biblical texts we preach on. Sometimes the story is one we've already studied and preached on numerous times before. That's the case with this story in Matthew. When I preached on it for you in 2010 I focused on the scandalous aspects of the story. The young woman is pregnant, and her soon-to-be husband is about to set her aside. Though for progressive thinkers in the 21st century the scandal lies in the statement from the angel that "the child conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit." Social scandal, theological scandal. But, of course these days, scandals are routine, daily, and banal.

What captured my attention this week was that opening line of the angel—"Don't be afraid." Let's ponder for a moment what Joseph had reason to fear. The most immediate thing

was this heavenly creature. We can imagine bright light, which no one likes to see in the middle of their sleep. We can imagine some stature, authority, and strength which are likely intimidating. What else? Wings would be a little scary if there are wings like some have imagined. Sometimes angels are pictured with swords, and that would be frightening. We aren't even sure that this angel is humanoid, if the angel looks like the cherubim or seraphim with their beastly appearances, then I can imagine being pretty frightened.

But beyond the angelic visitation, what does Joseph have to fear? The dishonor that could be done to his reputation? The social stigma? The loss of affection and love? Shame, guilt, what else? He's once again been made aware of his human vulnerability, and we humans aren't too keen on being reminded of our vulnerability.

Fear, then, is a quite natural emotion for Joseph to be experiencing. In fact, you can imagine him tossing and turning with anxiety, having trouble sleeping, and then his sleep is invaded by what would at first appear to be a nightmare. Anyone ever had an experience like that when you were stressed out, anxious, and afraid? Of course you have. So, we get it.

I just recently read *The Monarchy of Fear* by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. It's the book she wrote in the wake of the 2016 presidential election when she diagnosed that fear had become a dominant force in American politics, which is dangerous. Nussbaum has spent her career studying the emotions and their intersections with political thought. In the introduction to this book she wrote, "Fear all too often blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope, and impedes constructive cooperation for a better future."

Interestingly, in her first chapter she argues that fear is in fact the first human emotion. It is the first emotion that newborns experience as they encounter a strange world and are incapable of providing for themselves and are reliant upon caregivers. Fear is rooted in our extreme vulnerability and narcissism as infants. Of course a healthy developmental process—where we are cared for, receive affection, attach to supportive adults, and learn coping skills—helps to mitigate the power of fear.

But it can re-emerge. She writes, "The narcissistic anxious world in which we began swells up again in time of need and fear, jeopardizing our halting steps toward moral adulthood and constructive citizenship." When we are afraid, it's like the helpless, narcissistic infant inside of us takes over again.

Nussbaum goes on in the book to document how fear feeds anger, disgust, and envy and together these negative emotions form a toxic brew. Toxic for our individual moral character and happiness, and particularly toxic for society. She identifies this toxic brew as affecting contemporary American life. I would add to that some other negative emotions like cynicism and despair.

So, Nussbaum's philosophical thoughts on fear resonated for me with the opening words of the angel to Joseph. Here, then, is how I want to read the story from Matthew this year.

In the midst of Joseph's fear, God sends a message—I am coming to be with you, I'm going to be born as a child, so don't be afraid.

I'm proposing that we read this message as spoken to us to. Imagine that you are tossing and turning in your sleep with anxiety. You are awakened by the blinding light of an

angel appearing. And then the angel delivers a message from God, "Anxious people of Omaha, don't be afraid. I'm being reborn. I'm going to be with you."

That, I believe, is the message God has for us on the Fourth Sunday of Advent in 2019.

Pretty much every year about this time, I remind you that the great fourteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart proclaimed:

It would be of little value for me that 'the Word was made flesh' for man in Christ as a person distinct from me, unless he was also made flesh for me personally so that I too might be God's son.

Eckhart taught us to view the birth of Christ not solely as a past historical event, but as everlastingly present. The birth of Christ is on-going, in that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is born anew in us. The ongoing importance of Christmas and the incarnation is that we become the newly born children of God as God is present with us.

So, if we are going to be reborn this year, what do we want that to look like? What is going to be different in our new selves?

Well, the answer we, your ministers are proposing, is that in our new birth we radiate with joy.

When we picked this year's Advent theme "Radical Joy," we knew we were proposing something that seems counterintuitive. How can we be joyful in a time such as this, when the toxic brew of fear, anger, hatred, division, and violence is such a part of our daily lives? Wouldn't it be a shirking of moral concern, of ethical responsibility, of realistic, rational response to current events?

And yet there are a handful of voices calling us to be joyful in precisely such a time as this because we must. It is times like this which require joy the most.

These last four weeks we've explored this idea in word and song and a wildly entertaining radio play. And what we've concluded is that Joy is renegade because our troubled times want us to be cynical and despairing, angry and fearful. Joy is revolutionary because it imagines and insists upon a beautiful, wonderful vision of our future together upon this earth. And runaway Joy is always already there, inside us, waiting to be shared with other people.

What would it mean, then, to let joy be born in us this year? To radiate with joy?

The poet Derek Walcott records a conversation he had with fellow poet Adam Zagajewski, in which Walcott asked Zagajewski if Zagajewski believed in happiness. Walcott records that Zagajewski answered that he did not, but that he did believe in joy. And added "Joy is an illumination, a benediction, a visitation. In the twentieth century, it required nothing less than a belief in angels."

Walcott then reflects upon this answer:

What does such a visitation of delight do but confirm the reality of the soul, the redemption of experience, the affections of hope, of gratitude to the light and to the unheard music that light contains . . . but most of all confirming a calling.

Is this what will happen to us if we are visited by delight and joy? It will confirm our souls, redeem our experience and hope, fill us gratitude, and confirm our calling? Our calling to be fully human, to follow Christ, to be more like God, to be creatures of faith and love? That seems to be what the poets are telling us.

According to Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem "So Much Happiness" which was read earlier in the service, nothing, not even us, can contain joy, so it "flows out of [us] into everything [we] touch." In other words, it radiates from us. Meaning that if joy is born in us, we alone can't contain it. It becomes viral and it spreads to other people.

Our Reformed tradition has long taught that the chief end and purpose of human life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Enjoyment is our primary purpose and calling. To enjoy God and all that God has given to us. An even more ancient Christian wisdom is that the glory of God is a humanity fully alive. To enjoy life, to live abundantly, is what we are here for.

Sometimes that is difficult. Our traumas and pains make that difficult. Our social circumstances, the injustices of the world, its violence and poverty, make that incredibly difficult. And periods of social upheaval, such as this one, with its toxic brew of fear, anger, disgust, and envy, make that difficult.

But enjoyment still our work. The work of being human. Of finding those things, even if they are little and momentary, to delight in and celebrate.

Let's draw these threads together. In the midst of our fear, God is speaking to us, "Anxious people of Omaha, don't be afraid. I'm being reborn. I'm going to be with you. I am going to be born anew in you this year."

Let's make that a new birth of enjoyment. Why? Because I think joy can help conquer our fear. Joy has a tendency to become viral. Joy can spawn some hope and some faith and some love. All those good things we need to live fully as God's children and begin to set things aright.

Let's radiate with God's glory because we are fully alive, enjoying all the blessings of this world given to us by God. That, my friends, is the message of Advent and Christmas.

Rejoice, rejoice, for God is with us, Emmanuel, is coming.