

“Do Not Be Afraid to Come to the Manger”

Matthew 1:18-25;

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Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[a] 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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^[b] and he named him Jesus.

I. DO NOT BE AFRAID TO BE BRAVE!

Have you ever been afraid? Afraid of the dark? Afraid to take a risk, try something new, buck the tide, reach out beyond your comfort zone?

Have you ever looked back at your life and wondered, “What if....?” What if I had taken *that* path? Answered yes to *that* opportunity? Stood up for what I *knew* was right, even when everyone around me was calling for a *different* way forward, standing on a different platform? Promoting a different message?

Rev. Cameron Trimble, in her incredible book: “Piloting Church: Helping Your Congregation Take Flight,” says she often stands up in front of a group of church folks—pastors and lay leaders and everyone in the pews, and asks the question:

“What would you do if you were *brave*?”

What would *we* do—individuals, churches, denominations, communities—if we knew we couldn’t *fail*? “What would be the biggest, boldest, and most faithful contribution [we all] could make to the world we are creating together?”

Trimble suggests that most of us—personally and collectively—feel “*inspired and deflated at the same time*.” We think “being brave” is some big, unattainable goal for everybody *except* us—for the people in Hollywood, or the Fortune 500, or something for “those people out there.”

But, she reminds us, as followers of Christ, believers in God, bravery is simply ‘*creativity in action*.’ With the help of God, of course! “I can do all things through the One who strengthens me,” scripture reminds us.

“Bravery is feeling all the fear of change, of trying something new, of embracing new ideas, of exploring new terrain, of preaching new sermons, of embracing new relationships, of accepting new jobs, of singing new songs, of living in new places, of saying goodbye to what was and *still* making that change and embracing what can be.” (p. 10)

What would we do if we were brave?

II. DO NOT BE AFRAID, JOSEPH!

Dear Joseph was asked the very same question that is before us today. “What would you do if you were brave, Joe?”

Rev. Marjorie Weiss (in ‘Joseph the Dreamer’) shares what it *might* have been like for Joseph—this moment of decision. This time when he was afraid, but chose to be brave. Imagine being Joseph. Imagine that this is you, at a crucial turning point in your life. A moment of decision.

“About a month after Mary returned from Jerusalem and only a few weeks before our wedding, my Papa sat me down and told me terrible news. Mary had returned pregnant. Her father had told him the day before, telling him Mary had finally told them herself only the day before that. No, they did not know who the father was and Mary was not saying. What shame she has brought on her family!

I could not take it all in. My Mary, having a baby. Someone else’s baby. I did not get the chance to be the first man with her! Papa reminded me that the law was clear about what needed to be done. She should be stoned to death for this adultery.

"Never," I said. "Maybe she was raped. It might not have been her fault. Mary would not do this to me or her family."

"Don't be such a dreamer, Joseph. Now is not the time for such thinking. Be practical. Of course she did this. If she had been raped she would have said so. Even if she was, you do not want to raise such a child. We will find you another wife. Mary must be stoned."

"No, never," I screamed. And I ran up to the hill, to my secret place and wept till I could not anymore. Mary, what have you done? I could not have her killed. She understood me. What could I do? I decided what to do.

Without telling my Papa, I went to Mary's home with the papers for divorce. I would get them to sign them and end our union, without bringing charges of adultery against Mary.

Her father, thanked me, but told me the shame of her condition would become known anyway soon enough, but he was glad his daughter would not be killed. We made arrangements to sign the papers the next day when my parents would have to be there.

I saw Mary watching us from inside the house and she seemed different somehow. I did not understand, but saw the tears streaming down her face and she mouthed the words, *thank you*, and I think, *I love you*. I loved her too.

When I told my parents they were not happy with my decision, but said it was a just thing, a practical thing, nevertheless. They told me I was a man, now and they would stand by my decision and be with me to sign the divorce papers.

That night I had a dream. A dream of dreams. Never had I had such an experience. God spoke to me and told me Mary was pregnant with the

Messiah. I should not be afraid to marry her, because it was all part of God's plan.

God needed me, that was clear. I was told to name the baby Jesus. If I named the baby, that would show everyone that I was establishing legal fatherhood over this child.

But how am I to raise the Messiah? I am not rich. I am not of the family of the high priest, those closest to God. Mary is not either. Could I believe this dream, this messenger from God? I was a son of David, wasn't I? But, maybe my Papa was right about me after all? Dreams get you no where. Isn't that true?

"A dream! Joseph, a dream told you to marry Mary. What will we tell the neighbors? They will think you and Mary blasphemous, putting yourselves in the place of God and claiming God is working through you. I forbid it," Papa said as Mama sat there and cried.

"Papa, you told me I was an adult, and this is what I want to do. You don't have to tell people about the Messiah. They wouldn't believe you anyway. You don't even have to pay the bride price. I am sure her family will just be glad I will marry her and save their reputations. I am going over there right now to tell them the news. Dreamer, or not, this is what I must do."

III. WHAT WOULD JOSEPH DO? What would *you* do if you were Joseph?

Joseph has an awful lot of tides to buck! To put up with shunning, shame, ostracism. People's whispering around the village. Rumors. He tried so hard—to figure out a plan, to "take care of it quietly"—whatever *that* meant in that day and time! There's a little ominous tone to that scripture line.

But when he listened to the message from God—delivered by the angel in a dream—he took Mary as his wife.

He loved her—in spite of the rumors; in spite of the gossip.

In spite of not knowing the whole story—"how was that again, that she became pregnant?"

"The Holy Spirit?! Really? Did I hear that right? Or did I only *dream* that?"

“Dreams are awfully fuzzy in the morning, you know!”

Then, Joseph did more amazing things. With incredible courage and faith. After he took Mary to be his wife—in spite of the naysayers and the cold looks from everyone—he took Jesus to be his son, and raised him as his own.

And before he could even begin to raise him, a life-and-death situation occurred, and Joseph had to summon up even more courage. He had to pray to God and scoop up his young family and flee their home! Everything they had known. Their very lives, country and village, security.

Why? Because this Son, this Baby Jesus, whom the Angel had told him was “of God” but Joseph’s responsibility to raise, was now in danger for his very life! A despot wanted to kill Joseph and God’s baby! Powerful rulers were out to harm their family.

“Be not afraid Joseph.”

The baby is of God. This pregnancy is of God. But this evil intent by man is *not* of God.

“You know your heart, Joseph. You know what is right. You’ve already done one huge right thing. You obeyed and trusted. Trusted and obeyed. You took Mary to be your wife. You bucked the status quo. The whispering and slander you knew were going on. And you took this woman and this precious child into your heart, home and life.”

Joseph lived his convictions. He followed the way of God—countering all the other messages he was hearing. He did the right thing. The loving thing. He didn’t know for sure what the path would be that lay ahead. He likely wondered if that dream was all “something made up in his head.”

Thank goodness he did! Because we wouldn’t have Jesus! If Joe had listened to the crowd; not rocked the boat; not bucked the status quo—“The way things are. The proper way things are to be done.” “The way we’ve always done it.” We would not be here today. Worshiping in a Christian Church, celebrating Christmas—the birth of the Christ Child, Emmanuel, God with Us.

Ponder that for a moment. We ponder with Mary and about Mary a lot in this season, and feel relief and celebration that *she* listened to the Angel and God’s calling on her life. And that is all important and well and good! But Joseph is a little too much in the shadows, I’d say. Almost an after-thought. An “also ran.” An agent of the Spirit, but not so important, because he was “only the earthly father.”

IV. BE BRAVE!

“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.

Do not be afraid, sons and daughters of God, to take on something you're not sure of. Do not be afraid to reach out and stand strong in the storm. Be not afraid to do the loving, life-giving, and uplifting thing. To share an encouraging word (or many!) with another; to stick your neck out to bring help where help is needed. Do not be afraid to buck the status quo, challenge the rumors, challenge the system and the way things are, or "supposed to be done."

God will be with you—just as God is with Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the angels and the shepherds, and the wise ones who only had dreams, angels' messages and a star to follow for a sign! God is with *us*, Emmanuel, *just* as he was with all of them, long ago in a village far away.

Be brave! Come to the manger! Today, this week. Come to Jesus. Find your heart there. Your courage, your strength, your hope, peace, love and joy! For there, in that manger, we find ourselves. In that stable, pausing in awe and wonder at what is about to be born in our midst.

We must only be brave. To seek the courage of Joseph and Mary. Open our hearts and lives to what God wants to do in us and with us.

Merry Christmas! Amen.