

AN ANGEL OFFERS GOD'S REASSURING WORDS

"The Angels of Christmas" Sermon Series, week 3

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 1:1,17, 18-25

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Today, "The Angels of Christmas" sermon series continues with an angel's delivery of yet another important message from God to one who would also play an important role in God's unfolding salvation plan. But before we jump into today's third appearance by an angel, I'm going to quickly review our previous appearances. Two weeks ago, an angel named Gabriel surprised a faithful man by the name of Zechariah while he was carrying out his priestly duties at the Temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel's message from God to Zechariah was that his longtime prayer and his wife, Elizabeth's longtime prayer, had been heard by God and was about to be answered. At their advanced age, they would have a baby named John, and not only would their baby be the answer to their prayers, but he would also be the beginning of God's answer to the prayers of others who were hoping for change and longing for a Savior.

Last Sunday, God once again sent the Angel Gabriel to deliver an important message, but this time, Gabriel did not go to the big, important, wealthy city of Jerusalem, but to the very small and very poor town of Nazareth. Nazareth was inhabited by those who lived at the very bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder of that day. Gabriel appeared to a teenager named, Mary, someone who was clearly not favored by her society, and yet she was favored by God and chosen to be a major player in God's saving plan. The angel's appearance was unexpected and startling, and there was much that Mary did not understand, and yet her response was, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (Lk 1:38). Throughout the centuries and still today, Mary's response is held up as an example of faithfulness. Mary's role to bear, give birth to, nurse and raise God's Son was singularly unique, and yet last Sunday's Christmas angel story was a call and challenge to faithfulness for all of us. The angels' message to Mary reminded each one of us, as ordinary as we are, that we are also called to accept and participate in the mysterious and saving work of God in the world.

The past two Sundays our Christmas angel stories came from the Gospel of Luke, but today we look to the Gospel of Matthew. Unlike Luke's writer, who was mainly writing to Gentile followers of Jesus, Matthew was writing to an audience of primarily Jewish followers of Jesus. Matthew is the only Gospel to begin with a genealogy, but he does so because he wants to make sure that his audience knows that Jesus, the last name on his genealogy is the fulfilment of all that God was doing throughout the history of Israel. I have a feeling that Chelsea is more than a little grateful that I had her only read verses 1 and 17 this morning, because verses 2-16 included a lot of difficult-to-pronounce names. Also with the help of his genealogy, Matthew introduces us to Joseph – one who is both historically significant and critically important to God's salvation plan. Because Joseph was a descendent of King David, it meant that Jesus fulfilled the

prophecies that God's Messiah would come from the lineage of David. So, today we turn to Joseph's story, a story that is sometimes overlooked in the light of Mary's story. Joseph's story like Mary's begins with an encounter by an angel of the Lord. Today, God's angel speaks to Joseph, the man and husband of Mary, who is often relegated to the shadows, behind his famous wife.

Throughout the centuries, Mary has been depicted in countless works of art – paintings, statues, stained glass – but only occasionally can her husband, Joseph, be found in the background of one of those works of art. Books and poetry and prayers have been written about Mary, and countless sermons have been preached about her. It's not unusual to find a sole statue of Mary adorning someone's yard, but the only time you are likely to see Joseph at all is when he is standing beside his wife this time of year as part of a nativity display. Yes, Mary stands out, but Joseph is also essential to God's plan. In fact, his participation was so important to the story of Jesus' birth that it warranted the special delivery of a message from an angel. Today, we look at Joseph and consider both his part and his response to God's plan.

To understand Joseph, we need to understand the expectations placed upon him by his society. In that day and culture, the customs were very different compared to our day and culture. For example, the normal Jewish marriage was comprised of three steps. There was the engagement, the betrothal, and then the actual marriage. The engagement was often made when the man and woman were children, perhaps not long after their births. It was typically made by the parents or through a professional matchmaker, and it was often made without the couple ever having seen each other. The next step was the betrothal. Whereas, an engagement could be easily terminated, the betrothal was absolutely binding. The betrothal lasted for one year. During that time, the couple was usually given opportunities to meet and get to know each other. During the betrothal year, the couple was known as husband and wife, but they did not yet live together. Because a betrothal was binding, it could only be ended by a formal divorce which was rare in those days. It was at the end of the betrothal year that a couple would then be formally married. Joseph and Mary were in the betrothal stage when Mary became pregnant.

It's also important to know that a betrothed man and woman did not engage in any physical intimacy. That was only permitted once they were fully married. Engaging in physical intimacy before marriage was considered a crime against God's law. We don't know how Mary broke the news of her pregnancy to Joseph, but for him it was a critical problem that the child was not his child. In our passage, Joseph is described as "*a righteous man*" (Mt 1:19). As a "righteous man," he believed in the authority of God's Law, and he faithfully followed those laws. Therefore, Joseph as a "righteous man," could not have tolerate what was obviously adultery; it was a sin and therefore an offensive to all people of faith. And then there was the human level, I imagine Joseph was confused and hurt, and he likely felt betrayed.

If Joseph stuck to the law as a righteous man, he had two options. There was a **public divorce**, which would have involved the public humiliation of Mary, but at least Joseph's righteous name would be maintained in the process. Such

public humiliation would have resulted in Mary being shunned by all people of faith, including her family. This public option, like I mentioned last week, may have also resulted in Mary being dragged into the street and stoned to death. That didn't happen often, because it was against Roman law for anyone to take the law into their own hands. And yet, in every day and age there are those who take the law into their own hands. But there was a second option for Joseph, there was a private divorce in which he could "*dismiss her quietly*" (Mt. 1:19). He could then hope that most people didn't find out about Mary's condition. The quiet option would save him from embarrassment and ridicule, and it might also save Mary from "*public disgrace*" (Mt. 1:19) and being labeled an "outcast" for the rest of her life.

For a righteous man like Joseph public or private divorce were the only two options given by the Law. Joseph chose the private divorce option. He chose the more compassionate of the two options. That right there tells us something important about the kind of man Joseph was, because many a man in that day did not choose the private divorce option. For you see, a man's reputation was considered of much greater value than a woman's life. Unfortunately, that is still sometimes the case even in our day.

However, not even the more compassionate option was God's plan. And so, God dispatched an angel to present an unheard of third option. God wants Joseph to ignore the Law and to make the scandalous decision of going through with his marriage to Mary. This time the angel that comes to Joseph is not identified as Gabriel, but simply "*an angel of the Lord...*" (Mt 1:20). Not only is this different than our first two Christmas angel appearances, but unlike Zechariah and Mary who were wide awake, Joseph is asleep. The unnamed angel appeared to Joseph 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*" (Mt 1:20-21). This acknowledgement of fear was not because of an angel's startling appearance, but because of the radical thing God was asking him to do. Joseph, don't be afraid about what other people might say. Don't be afraid about the difficulties ahead. Don't be afraid to carry out God's mission. Don't be afraid because God is with you and God will see you through.

Today's unnamed angel offers God's reassuring words to Joseph for Mary truly is carrying a child who is God's plan for salvation, and Joseph's role was to be an adoptive earthly father for God's divine child. After Joseph woke up, "*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*" (Mt 1:24-25). When God sets before us a mission by way of an angelic messenger or by way of scripture speaking to us, we are typically called to do more than listen. We are called to respond and that is exactly what Joseph did. Joseph chose faith in God over his commitment to the Law of God, and by doing so he found himself on what was then the very uncommon pathway of marrying a pregnant fiancée.

It's also significant that Joseph was not even allowed to choose the name of the boy who would grow up as his son. For in that day, there was no greater

parental privilege for a Jewish father than to name the son who would continue his lineage. Even that naming privilege was taken away from Joseph. And yet, Joseph responded in faith to God. Like Mary, Joseph did not question the message. Joseph did what God wanted him to do, and not what his society and others expected him to do. Joseph's son would be named "Jesus" meaning "God saves" and Jesus will fulfill God's salvation plan of delivering people from the power that sin had over their lives. Jesus will lead people in God's way of love and grace. He will cite the letter of the Law, but then he will tell his listeners to live by the heart, spirit, and intention of the Law.

It's noteworthy that not a single word from the mouth of Joseph was ever recorded for future generations. Clearly, his role was not to speak beautiful and prophetic words for future generations like Mary and Zechariah. His role was to trust God's plan, and then to act in faith according to God's plan. Joseph discovered that being righteous sometimes requires struggling with complex moral decisions and problems and making choices that may be contrary to what others are saying and yet they are exactly what God wants us to do.

There are times when we are going to struggle with how to act in faith because our traditions and accepted rules conflict with the Spirit of God who is calling us to a new way of living and relating to others. Like Joseph, the greatest step of faith we can take may be to allow God to lead us where we would not have gone, and to embrace a role we would have never imagined for ourselves. I believe God continues to do new things today, which means we are invited to listen to the messages of God's angels, to remember God's reassuring promise to be with us, and then to act accordingly. Because we are willing to trust in God's plan and respond in faith today, may God's plan of salvation continue to unfold in this place and through each one of us! Amen.