

“Fear Not!, Joseph”
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Text: 1:18-25
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¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfil 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.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord
commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a
son; and he named him Jesus.*

My wife, Jennifer, and I met at a party spring of our freshmen year in college; April 25, 1985 to be exact. We danced the night away and had a wonderful evening. I was quite taken by her. Though Auburn is a relatively big school, it’s in a small setting so you run into people between classes or on the quad or out at local night spots. That happened with us for the rest of that spring. It didn’t hurt that I figured out which door she came out of after her history class ended. My next class just happened to be in that same auditorium, and we “just happened” to run into each other most weeks. I could never get the courage up to ask her out, so when the spring quarter ended, so did my hopes of getting to know her better.

As fate (or perhaps providence) would have it, that summer she happened to live with a friend of mine from Tallahassee. We saw each other all the time. My friend counseled me not to come on too strong, that Jennifer just liked to have fun and wasn’t into romance. That was the worst advice ever. By the end of the summer, Jennifer put me in the friend zone uttering those words no romantically interested guy ever wants to hear: “You’re such a good friend.” By our senior year, it all worked out, thanks be to God—but that’s another story.

Human beings long for relationship. It’s in our DNA. We seek relationship with another, be it friendship, or romantic relationship, or simply connection with another person. It is part of what it means to be human. We are wired for relationship. “It is not good for a person to be alone,” as the Lord says in Genesis. But this desire for relationship brings with it a tremendous vulnerability. The minute we open ourselves up to relationship, we are vulnerable. We are vulnerable to rejection, to hurt, to betrayal, to being put in the friend zone, to all those potential pains that come with opening ourselves up to another human being. This creates anxiety within us. Just as our individual passion for life and the vulnerability of our finitude create anxiety in the personal sphere of our existence, so too we are inherently anxious in our relationships.

Case in point: Joseph and his betrothed, Mary. The Bible doesn't describe to us the process by which Joseph and Mary were betrothed to one another. In the ancient world it was much more complicated than meeting at a party, dating for a while, then getting engaged after seeking the blessing of the fiancé's family. Likely, their families knew each other for quite some time. Likely, their relationship was arranged. Likely, Joseph was much older than Mary—this was the custom of their culture. Yet amid all the differences between their world and ours, core realities no doubt remain the same. Surely they cared for one another. Surely they had developed some relationship through the course of their betrothal and engagement. Surely they looked forward to a life together. This is to say, they had a relationship.

This, by definition, made them vulnerable. That vulnerability comes to the fore when Mary is "found to be with child of the Holy Spirit." I'm not exactly sure how this was discovered, nor how it was determined. That's another sermon. Suffice to say, his fiancé is found to be in the family way, and Joseph knows he is not the father. We talked about the fear and anxiety this must have brought to Mary last week. This week, we consider Joseph's fear and anxiety, the fear and anxiety that comes from relationship.

Imagine the hurt he must have felt. How could he possibly believe her explanation about her pregnancy? Two thousand years later, some Christians still wonder about the possibility of virgin birth. How could Joseph possibly accept her explanation. Of course, we must remember that they lived under the oppression of an occupying army, where women were no doubt victimized routinely, so there is another possible explanation. He likely hurts not only for himself, but also for her.

There is also anxiety for Joseph, anxiety about his relationship with her, about his reputation in the community. He is a *tzadik*, a righteous man as recognized by his community. This is more than simply being "a good guy." It means he is recognized as a man who is scrupulous about keeping the commandments of God as revealed in Torah, the law. As one scholar puts it, *tzadik's*, "strive to live life in harmony with the will of God, to follow to the letter all of the provisions of the Mosaic Law."¹ According to Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22, the penalty Mary faces is being stoned to death, along with the father if he can be found. That's what the Bible says. As a righteous man, Joseph would feel compelled to do what the Bible says, wouldn't he? But he cared about Mary. He didn't want to be responsible for her execution. He didn't want to see her humiliated. Yet the law is what it is. He is a *tzadik*. If he wants to remain one, he must live by the law. Can you feel the anxiety and fear in Joseph?

Fortunately, Matthew redefines righteousness. He describes Joseph's thought process this way: "Being a righteous man, unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he resolves to dismiss her quietly." Righteousness for Matthew is about something different than following the letter of the law, it's about right relationship. Joseph doesn't want Mary killed—she's just a girl. Who knows what the circumstances were? In addition, he's not keen to be shamed publicly either. In his righteousness, Joseph resolves to break the engagement quietly, go on with his life and let her deal with hers. Relationships inevitably create vulnerability, which leads to fear and anxiety. So it was in Joseph's relationship with Mary; so it often can be with us.

Enter God's presence. Just when Joseph reached his conclusion, just as he figured out a way to maintain his integrity in the face of an embarrassing situation, his first decent night's sleep in weeks is invaded by

¹ Thomas G. Long. *Matthew in the Westminster Bible Companion Series*, (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997,) pp. 12-13.

a messenger from God who turns his perceptions of the world upside down. What does the angel say? “Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, (sound familiar?) Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Do not be afraid? It took him a lifetime to build his reputation; this one action would ruin it. How will his friends and neighbors in the community view him? He’ll either be a sinner, or a sucker. Either way, his status as a righteous man will be over. What will people say? How will people see him? More personally, how can he ever repair things with Mary?

Ultimately it requires trust. Trust in the angel’s message; trust in Mary; trust in God; trust that God is indeed in this and working to accomplish God’s purposes. Ultimately Joseph must trust God is with them. Michael Kirby, my friend and colleague in my preaching group put it this way, the angel invites Joseph, “to see things as they really are, rather than as they appear to be.” That takes trust. By all appearances, this situation is unseemly. From the viewpoint of the world, the story of the virgin birth is less about purity than scandal, at least that’s how it appears to be. But that’s not the way things really are. No, this scenario is conceived by God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph may be worried about saving his reputation, but God is working to save the world. And the way God is working invites us to see things as they really are, not as they appear to be.² Can Joseph trust this? Can trust be the antidote to his fear and anxiety?

Indeed, he does. Reality is changed forever because Joseph trusts. Walter Brueggeman names the way this miracle redefines our reality. He writes, “While our world feels unsavable, here is a baby named, ‘Save.’ Our world and our lives often feel abandoned, and here is the baby named ‘God with us.’ So we are ready to have our lives and our world contradicted by this gift from God.”³ Put another way, Joseph is ready to see things as they really are, not as they appear to be. That takes incredible trust.

Are we willing to trust like that? Can we trust God might be working in our lives and in the lives of those we love and care about in ways that might not make any sense to us? Can we trust God enough to let go of the anxiety and fear the too often pervade our relationships? Can we trust that our tomorrows are in God’s hands and not in our own? Can we trust enough to be vulnerable to one another, to risk our reputations, to risk rejection for the sake of relationship?

In the end, isn’t that what God has done for us? Coming to us in this baby named, “Emmanuel,” “God with us;” does it get any more vulnerable than that? Talk about risk, yet God was willing to do that. Why? For relationship with us, for the chance to be loved by us. Can we trust God enough to let ourselves be vulnerable to the possibilities of relationship with God, a relationship that just might change everything?

I witnessed what that kind of trust and vulnerability look like in my wife, Jennifer. Of course, eventually I got out of the friend zone. We married March 3, 1990. Six months later, my pastor asked me if I’d ever considered ministry, and a four-year journey of discernment began. That had not been on either of our radars. By July 1994, we were cashing out of life and heading to Greek School at Columbia Theological Seminary. I’ve always been amazed by Jennifer’s capacity to trust. She trusted enough to let me quit my job. She trusted enough for us to sell our house and cash in our 401k. She trusted that God was working in way beyond anything either of us could have possibly imagined. Today, here we are. I got

² This phrase is from my friend and colleague in the Well, Michael Kirby. It was in his paper for our preaching group in 2014.

³ Walter Brueggemann’s sermon, “A New World Birthed,” on Day One, cited 12/17/10 from: <http://day1.org/622-a-new-world-birthed>

involved in church because it was important to her. That's crazy! Neither of us could have possibly imagined this, and yet our lives have been blessed beyond measure by this odd and wondrous calling.

Beloved, in Christ, God has taken the risk to be in relationship with us, coming among us in a way that showed incredible trust. Joseph had the faith to trust Mary, to trust God, and the world was forever changed. Can we trust like that? Can we trust God and one another enough to let ourselves be vulnerable to the possibilities of relationships that just might change everything? Hear the word of the Lord to Joseph through that angel: "Do not be afraid...God is in all this...in this baby, God is with us...God is with us all. God is with the whole wide world."
Joseph trusted that word; can we?