

Sermon 22.12.18

Kate Heinzl, pastor UMC

1 Samuel 1: 19-28

Elkanah and Hannah rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'

The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.' Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the Lord establish his word.' So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, 'Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.'

She left him there for the Lord.

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.

SERMON: (Click [HERE](#) to see slides, starting on slide 17)

In January 2020, Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate (SLIDE) was invited to join five other young activists in a climate demonstration during the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. An Associated Press photographer snapped a photo of Nakate (SLIDE) standing with European climate activists Luisa Neubauer, Greta Thunberg, Isabelle Axelsson and Loukina Tille, but when the AP published the photo that afternoon, (SLIDE) Nakate had been quietly dismissed - removed from the picture.

“Being cropped out of that photo changed me” she wrote.(SLIDE) “ I decided, from my perspective as a young African woman, that I would dedicate as much of my time as possible to addressing the many interlocking facets of the climate crisis, environmental justice and gender discrimination - and to do so without fear of erasure.”<sup>1</sup>

Quietly dismissed, once, Ms. Nakate now works without fear, as if she heard an angel encouraging her: “Do not be afraid” (SLIDE) “I don’t often get asked what recharges me, Nakate responded, but it’s my relationship with the Holy Spirit.”

Changed and enlivened by the Holy Spirit - we might say that of Joseph in our story from Matthew’s gospel as well.

Let’s back up for a moment, to the very beginning of Matthew’s gospel, (SLIDE)(turn with me in your pew bibles to page 783) where it reads “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Followed by a long, and curious list of ancestors that include women, non-Jews and morally questionable characters. But more on that genealogical list another time.

And at the end of this long recitation of those who came before, in verse 16,(SLIDE) we read of “Jacob, the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who was called the Messiah”.

Joseph is not named as Jesus’ biological father, as expected from the linear genealogical pattern, but as the husband of Mary. And yet, according to Jewish custom, Joseph is his legal parent, bringing completion to the lineage.

(BLANK SLIDE)

---

<sup>1</sup> Colon, Christina. “A Fight for God’s Creation” *Sojourners Magazine*, December 2022. P24.

One of Matthew's primary concerns in his gospel is to emphasize how Jesus stands in the stream of Jewish history and tradition. Our story today is the opening scene in Matthew's Gospel, both following and filling out the last step of the introductory genealogy.<sup>2</sup>

*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.*

Unlike Ms. Nakate, who had no choice in her being erased from the picture, our gospel narrative starts out with a major decision point - Joseph could have removed himself from the story. It was within his rights, as a law abiding Jewish man, to call her out, even have her stoned to death for no longer being a virgin. But he chooses the more discreet path - planning to quietly divorce Mary, effectively removing himself from this story, this genealogy going back all the way to Abraham, the beginning of Yahweh's relationship with the people, Israel.

Mary's pregnancy causes Joseph to make plans for a discreet divorce — but exactly why he does so is an intriguing question.

The familiar interpretation, that most of us right away assume, is that Joseph, "a righteous man," compassionately plans to keep things quiet, so as to help Mary avoid "public disgrace" for her infidelity. The distinguished preacher and scholar Fred Craddock has called Joseph the first great interpreter of scripture in the New Testament: in effect, Joseph subordinates texts like Deuteronomy 22, which give him permission to have her killed, in favor of texts like, Micah 6:8: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." In other words, Joseph wisely acts upon a justice deeper than what is merely "legal". Against the shadows of hateful violence dressed up as law, Joseph acts with merciful love.

But then an angel appears to him in a dream, assures him that Mary has in fact been faithful, that the pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit, and that he, Joseph, precisely as a "son of David," has a role to play. He is to name the child, "Jesus" (meaning "God saves"), to serve as the child's human father,

---

<sup>2</sup> [Courageous Love: SALT's Commentary for Advent Week Four](#)

and so to participate in the story of salvation, outlined in Matthew's opening genealogy and echoed in the ancient words of Isaiah.

This familiar interpretation is both elegant and persuasive. And yet many careful students of scripture — including Thomas Aquinas and St. Jerome— have argued for another reading instead.

The familiar interpretation assumes that Joseph initially learns of Mary's pregnancy without any explanation or reference to the Spirit, and only learns of the Spirit's involvement in the dream. But perhaps this gospel writer is saying something else: "she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit", reads our text - with child from the Holy Spirit, not just 'with child', implying that Joseph is aware of the Spirit's involvement from the start.

If Joseph thinks Mary has betrayed him, we might expect the angel in his dream to say, "do not be angry" or "do not be heartbroken" — but not "do not be *afraid* to marry her." In many scriptural stories, being afraid is indeed the first human response to divine presence, so it would make sense if Joseph's first reaction to Mary's divine-and-human pregnancy was fear. From this angle, instead of translating the angel's message to him as, *Hey, the child is from the Holy Spirit, not another man, so don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife...*, we might hear it instead as: *Joseph, don't let the fact that the child is from the Holy Spirit make you afraid to take Mary as your wife...*

What might Joseph be afraid of? Perhaps he's afraid of getting in the way of God's work, or of overstepping his calling, unable to see a role for an ordinary man like him in God's glorious play of redemption. Perhaps he considers himself unworthy of being the stepfather of God's child. Or perhaps he's simply unnerved and bewildered that God — the author of creation, has come so unimaginably, intimately near. It's easy to imagine him thinking, *Surely a child conceived from the Holy Spirit needs no human father!*

But then the angel appears to Joseph in a dream. *Do not be afraid, son of David! You have a role to play: to welcome the child into your lineage; to help name him; to help raise him; and to support Mary at every step along the way. Take courage, step up, and love!*

Biblical stories are often written in this kind of spare, open style, making room for us to reflect on our own fears and hopes from multiple perspectives.

But either way you read this story, the angel calls Joseph to a love that doubles as a kind of courage. Courage to commit — though the neighbors may whisper and judge. Courage to nurture — though the child you raise is from the Holy Spirit. Courage to love — though the child you love is none other than Love itself, none other than “The God Who Saves Is With Us.”

Courageous love - once again that's the response to the visitation of angels - those messengers who come announcing the start of something new. In the past weeks angels have shown up to Hagar, Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary and that unnamed mother of Samson. Each time those women courageously commit, nurture and love. Same with Hannah today. Her visitation is hinted at in our being told 'and the Lord remembered her'. And Hannah remembered her promise too, raising this first born son with every intention of bringing him to the priest as a nazirite - one who is sacred, set apart, to do God's will.

This week's Advent light is a candle of love - love that shines against the shadows of erasure and fear. And in this week's scripture readings we meet love in various forms - Hannah dedicating her child to the work of the Divine, and the writer of Matthew's gospel casting Joseph's decisions as compassionate, courageous love.

The birth of this child brings to completion the lineage of ancestors. The child is to be named Jesus and known as Emmanuel 'God is with us'. This is God's divine act of saving, sheltering love.

God's love is a saving, sheltering love.

The birds found on our tree this morning (SLIDE) aren't ones you'll find when wandering in the woods, but in backyards and on farms. (SLIDE)

Just as God's love is a sheltering love, so we might learn a thing or two from the lowly hen -

(IMAGE) Jesus lamented to his listeners - “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...” (Matt. 23: 37-38)

What might we learn?

Mother hens are known for being overprotective, but they are also great at letting their chicks figure things out for themselves. (SLIDE) When chicks are struggling to hatch from their eggs, mother hens don't rush in and crack the egg, they don't help pull the shell back. Instead, they sit nearby, quietly clucking their encouragement. A sheltering, encouraging love.

While a flock of hens might have a strict pecking order, the girls are also family. Chickens are very social and truly thrive as part of a flock. They dust bathe together, (SLIDE) they cheer each other on and join in their egg song when a friend has laid an egg. Even when a hen is incubating a clutch, when she leaves to grab a quick bite of food and stretch her legs one of her fellow hens will often come and sit on her nest for her... A love that cares for one another.

Hens are also known to sit on eggs and care for young that look nothing like themselves (IMAGE). Even when young chicks are introduced to a hen, she will often take them in, loving, caring , providing for all. A love that is wide, welcoming and spacious.<sup>3</sup>

These stories of angels announcing God's involvement in the world - reminding the participants to not fear... these birds (IMAGE) that have accompanied us through this Advent season, showing us what it is to live with hope, peace, joy and love - we have been surrounded by God's messengers. In this season of darkening days, may we move forward toward the light of Christmas, opening ourselves to this spacious love - opening ourselves to receive Emmanuel, God with us.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://thecapecoop.com/5-lessons-we-can-learn-from-chicken-moms/>