

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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce 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 become pregnant and give birth to 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 given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

In the fall of 2014, I was a brand new campus pastor, wondering what I had got myself into. (SLIDE) I had lots of ideas of how to connect with college students, but my first few attempts at events and activities had felt flat. No one knew about our new campus group, and it was hard to stand out in a sea of 1000 student organizations. The reality of creating something significant on a campus that already had 60 faith groups, as well as dozens of justice-minded advocacy groups, was shifting my excitement toward an anxious fear. I remember wondering if I had what it takes to make a difference on this campus.

That same fall, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was just taking shape. I have this memory of slipping into the back of a gathering in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center. As a privileged white guy, I wasn't sure how my presence would be understood. Before the planning event began, I nervously asked a student next to me if it was okay that I was there, and if there was anything I could do to be helpful. He turned toward me with a surprised look on his face - "Of course you can be here! And there's one thing we need you to do - just stand with us." (SLIDE)

I had been fearful that I did not have the capacity to help, but it turned out that what was needed from me was not some grand idea or some new program - what the students were looking for was an ally.

And it wasn't just students of color. Over time we learned that standing alongside LGBT students, first generation college students, international students, grad students wanting to unionize, Muslim students facing islamaphobia, students carrying mental health burdens, the list goes on and on... was far more powerful than I had expected. (SLIDE)

So often fear paralyzes us when we do not see a solution to our problems. We understand the weight or the pain, but we don't think we have the capacity or capability of providing a solution. Sometimes the challenge is so massive - climate change, wealth inequality, sexism, racism, etc - that we know that whatever we do will not change these massive systemic problems. So we freeze up. Our fear makes us paralyzed.

But here's the thing - for those sometimes all that's required of us is to be present.

In Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee's reflection in our Advent planning materials for this Sunday, she reflects this way; "In a world defined by empire, masculinity, and honor-shame boundaries, Joseph's posture is striking. (SLIDE) The Gospel opens with a quiet act of resistance: Joseph lays aside patriarchal expectation and legalistic judgment, choosing instead to protect Mary and the unborn child. In doing so, he becomes a quiet but vital part of God's liberating plan. Not to fix everything, but to show up with courage. To reach out and say: "Give me your hand." This kind of love—grounded in risk, humility, and faith."

I think this is what it means to join God's transformative spirit in our world today. (SLIDE) It's the same spirit that compels us to stand alongside those calling for peace at the Allen Street gates. It's the same spirit that guides us to stand alongside refugees, women escaping abuse, families living with

food or housing insecurity - anyone really, living vulnerably in our community.

We start each day with choices, whether we realize it or not. Joseph had a choice. He could have done what was expected of him and quietly dismissed Mary. He could have acted vindictively and publicly shamed her. But instead he did something far more powerful and transformative. He chose to stand by her. Love, grounded in risk, humility, and faith.

It is worth mentioning that simply standing beside those who are vulnerable should not give us permission to say that's the end, that our work is done. No, for those of us with power and privilege to influence change, more is required of us than simply standing. And perhaps especially so, if we are in positions that have the possibility to make people more vulnerable.

I don't want to suggest this morning that if we are part of the problem, that simply standing beside folks is enough. If a person is an abuser, standing beside those they abuse is not what we're talking about here.

This week I stumbled upon a documentary about entertainer Ed Sullivan. (SLIDE) I was born more than a decade after the final episode of the show was broadcast, so I mostly knew about Ed Sullivan from black and white documentary clips of Elvis or the Beatles making their American TV debuts. What I did not realize was that The Sullivan Show was also one of the very first places where Black Americans were seen on television - not as cliche stereotypes, but performing in their full and talented selves. And despite the CBS network being fearful of sponsorship money drying up, despite politicians and the KKK in the segregated South calling for boycotts of both the program and any company that chose to advertise there, Sullivan continued to be an ally. He offered space for prophetic voices like Nina Simone, Mohamed Ali, and Coretta Scott King. When Harry Belafonte was blacklisted for being too outspoken, and rumors started swirling that he was a communist, Sullivan called up his friend Harry to hear his side of the story, and soon after had him on the show again in an attempt to offer solidarity during his time of need. (SLIDE)

Sullivan reflected that when issues of race were brought up, his Irish parents would remind their children that their ancestors had been treated poorly as well, with similar kinds of bias and prejudice. Rather than turning his celebrity status into one more exclusive club, Sullivan maintained a posture of empathy because he saw his humanity in those that society was continuing to oppress.

Ed Sullivan knew that empathy required not just understanding someone's pain, but actively choosing to stand with them, even when it came at a personal or professional cost. (SLIDE) This is the spirit we see in Joseph, who chose love over law, protection over pride, and faith over fear. It is the same spirit that makes God's presence, Emmanuel, real in our broken world. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are called to embody this posture of radical presence, to let go of the paralysis of fear, and simply show up.

It is in these small acts that we can push back at the powers that oppress. We know that delivering care packages to Moshannon doesn't change the horrors of our oppressive immigration system. Just as God's presence with us does not mean the world will be free from oppression. We know that putting a rainbow flag in our church window doesn't end homophobia or violence against trans people. We know that donating gift cards to needy families does not end poverty or hunger in our community. We know that offering space for a Jewish Hanukkah celebration does not end antisemitism. We know that sitting with a friend who is grieving a loss does not take away their grief. (SLIDE)

And yet those small acts have the power to create ripples of change. They are moments that help lift the burden of someone in need. Those small acts make a difference and help God's presence be felt in a world still so in need of something more. Perhaps this is similar to the angel's message to Joseph, reminding him that despite the difficulties, God is with us.

As Advent shifts to the Christmas season, may we continue to look for the opportunities, both large and small, where you can stand alongside someone who is vulnerable. It might not be a grand, world-changing act; it might just be the quiet, humble risk of saying as Joseph said to Mary, "Give me your hand." It is in these moments of solidarity—grounded in risk, humility, and faith—that we might truly join God's transformative spirit and help bring about the liberating plan Jesus was born to fulfill. May we choose this day, and every day, to be present. Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.