

“Do Not Be Afraid”
Matthew 1:18-25
Sunday, December 19, 2010
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

John R. Brokhoff writes about Dr. Al Lindgren of Garrett Seminary, who took his junior high school son fishing:

“While waiting for the fish to bite, they got to talking. The son asked, ‘Dad, what was the toughest thing God ever tried to do?’ His father answered with a question, teacher style! His father asked, ‘What do you think was the toughest job God tried to do?’

“The son replied, ‘In science class, I thought that creation was God's toughest job. Later in Sunday School we were talking about miracles and I thought that maybe the resurrection was the toughest. But then I got to thinking. No one really knows God real well. Now I think the toughest thing God ever tried to do is to get us to understand who he is and that he loves us.’ His dad responded, ‘You're right, son. And it took God's Son to do it.’”

On this last Sunday of Advent, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and the new life he brings.

At the same time, we may be fearful. He is Other. We cannot fully know him; he is unknowable. We cannot fully prepare for all that He brings. We see with human insight; his view is infinite and eternal. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says to Joseph in a dream. The angel – identified as Gabriel in Luke’s gospel -- is speaking to us, also.

I. Reasons to be afraid: Turmoil in the world around us.

Mary and Joseph had reasons to be afraid that first Christmas. They lived in Palestine, where the Jews viewed Rome as “the wicked kingdom.” Or, we might say, “the evil empire.”

Rome, on the other hand, viewed Palestine as a necessary nuisance. Occupation of the region was costly. A constant military presence was needed to offset revolts.

But Palestine was vital to the defense of the Roman Empire’s eastern border. So the occupation was maintained.

In order to pay for this occupation, Palestine suffered heavy taxation. This was in addition to the religious taxes already in existence. The total taxation, from Roman rulers, Jewish puppet kings, and local priests is estimated to have totaled 35-40% of Palestine’s total yearly income. In a region where poverty prevented stockpiling for the future, and where famine came often, this taxation created an impossible economic burden.

This, then, was life for Mary and Joseph. Friends and relatives who hated the Roman occupation. Zealots planning revolts. Massacres of whole villages by eastern enemies of Rome. Poverty and starvation a cruel reality Roman soldiers everywhere. Corrupt Jewish leaders.

Leonard Sweet tells this story from Tom Brokaw’s book, The Greatest Generation, about Mary Wilson, presently of Dallas, Texas,

“You would never know by looking at this modest woman that she was the recipient of the Silver Star and she bore the nickname ‘The Angel of Anzio.’ You will recall that when the Allies got bogged down in the boot of Italy during World War II, they attempted a daring breakout by launching an amphibious landing on the Anzio Beach. Unfortunately, the Allies got pinned down at the landing site and came dangerously close to being driven back into the ocean. It looked like another Dunkirk was in the making.

“Mary Wilson was the head of the fifty-one army nurses who went ashore at Anzio. Things got so bad that bullets zipped through her tent as she assisted the surgeon in surgery. When the situation continued to deteriorate arrangements were made to get all of the nurses out. But Mary Wilson would have none of it. She refused to leave at the gravest hour. As she related her story years later, she said: ‘How could I possibly leave them. I was a part of them.’

“Our God is a good God. He does not desert us in our hour of need. He hears the cries of Israel. He hears the cries of the church. He hears the cries of His children. Christmas is about God’s eternal identification with the human dilemma.”

Mary and Joseph have many reasons to be afraid in the oppressive, hopeless society in which they live. Mary Wilson had many reasons to be afraid on that beach in Italy. We have many reasons to be afraid in our world today.

To make matters worse for Mary and Joseph, they are faced with a tough personal crisis as well.

II. Reasons to be afraid: Turmoil in our personal lives.

Besides living at one of the worst possible times in history, in one of the worst possible places on earth, Mary is now being asked by God to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. She’s not even married! Certainly her husband-to-be will never marry her now that she’s pregnant! If she isn’t stoned to death for her sinfulness, she and her child will face a life of even worse poverty and ostracism.

Joseph, described in today’s reading as a righteous man, is “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace,” and plans “to dismiss her quietly.” He may not be happy with Mary’s pregnancy, but he has no intention of claiming his right, by law, to have her stoned to death.

Luke's gospel has Mary, in the midst of all this craziness, singing praises to God. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Matthew's gospel has Joseph dreaming of an angel, who says, "...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."

What favor has God shown to Mary? What reassurance has God given to Joseph? Mary and Joseph are in a very difficult situation. Mary is set to be an unwed mother. Joseph is saddled with a very tough choice.

It reminds me of the old musical, "Sweet Charity." In the movie, Shirley MacLaine plays a hooker who experiences a particularly bad run of luck. Charity is a loving, trusting, gullible person who is constantly being taken advantage of. The worst is when her boyfriend-of-the-month leaves her, but not before stealing all her money and pushing her off a bridge into a pond.

Things begin to look up for Charity when she falls in love with Oscar, a very shy, very nice man, played by John McMartin. The two share a romantic courtship and eventually decide to get married. But again, Charity's heart is broken when Oscar backs out, unable to face spending the rest of his life with a fallen woman.

Now the way I see it, Charity ought to hang it up and get really mad at the world. She's had a terrible life, and her best chance at happiness has just tromped all over her heart with army boots.

Our hearts have been tromped all over with army boots, most of us. We have sorrows and griefs and fears. Our modern society is not less frightening than the Palestine of Mary's and Joseph's day. Our personal lives can often be crazy and filled with crisis, too.

Even if we have chosen to follow Jesus, we sometimes fear the future. And often at Christmas time our fears haunt us even more than usual. We fear the loss of loved ones, whether it be in a hospital bed or on a roadside in Afghanistan or in a car accident in L. A. We have good reasons to fear the loss of loved ones. We miss those we have already lost.

Our fears might include the fear of our own death, losing a job, living a meaningless life, facing our shortcomings, having a terminal illness, rising crime rates, financial insecurity, failures, successes, facing family during the holiday gatherings...

III. Reasons for peace, hope, joy and love: God is with us.

After Oscar leaves her, Sweet Charity cries herself to sleep on a park bench. The next morning, when she wakes up, a young girl walks by and hands her a daisy.

And Charity walks off smiling into the sunshine, ready to face a new day. Her characteristic hopefulness has been restored.

Mary is a similarly hopeful person. When she should be cursing God for her bad luck, she sings a song instead. Given a choice, she says ‘yes’ to the Messiah’s coming.

Joseph, although he is afraid and confused, makes a different choice from our friend, Oscar. Joseph, too, says ‘yes’ to God, ‘yes’ to the Messiah, ‘yes’ to the angelic messenger, ‘yes’ to Mary, ‘yes’ to Jesus.

Brett Blair shares this adaptation of a story by John Simmons:

“A grade school class was putting on a Christmas play which included the story of Mary and Joseph coming to the inn. In that class was one little boy who wanted very much to be Joseph. But when the parts were handed out, his biggest rival was given that part, and he was assigned to be the inn keeper instead. He was really bitter about this.

“So during all the rehearsals he kept plotting in his mind what he might do the night of performance to get even with his rival who was Joseph. Finally, the night of the performance, Mary and Joseph came walking across the stage. They knocked on the door of the inn, and the inn-keeper opened the door and asked them gruffly what they wanted.

“Joseph answered, ‘We’d like to have a room for the night.’ Suddenly the inn-keeper threw the door open wide and said, ‘Great, come on in and I’ll give you the best room in the house.’

“For a few seconds poor little Joseph didn’t know what to do, and a long silence ensued. Finally though, thinking quickly on his feet, Joseph looked in past the inn-keeper, first to the left and then to the right and said, ‘No wife of mine is going to stay in a dump like this. Come on, Mary, let’s go to the barn.’ And once again the play was back on course.

“It is obvious that Joseph cared deeply for Mary. He would not have risked his own reputation and protected hers if he did not. But his love was deeper and grounded on more than love for his bride to be. For you see he understood that obedience to God, even in the most dire of circumstances creates a life of substance and character.”

Together, Mary and Joseph say ‘yes,’ despite their awareness of the pain it will cause them. They know all too well the immediate difficulties which will arise. They fear for their own future and the child’s future.

Perhaps they also have a sense of the grief the child’s adult life will bring. And yet they says ‘yes’ because they trust in God.

In the Magnificat Mary sings, “The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought

down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel.”

In Matthew’s version of the story, Joseph does as he is commanded by the angel of the Lord. He takes Mary as his wife, and he names her son Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Joseph does not know or understand all that God has in store for humanity. Joseph does not even know what God has in store for him. But Joseph follows, obeys, and trusts that God is leading him where he ought to go.

Mary and Joseph trust that God will accomplish all the good things He promises, even though they are not yet a reality. Mary and Joseph teach us to trust the future to God. God is working today to plant the seeds of peace and joy for tomorrow. God’s ultimate act of salvation -- in sending Jesus, Emmanuel, to live among us -- continues to work for good in the world.

Like Mary and Joseph, we are called to say ‘yes’ to the coming of the Messiah. Even though accepting Jesus into our lives may cause us pain and difficulty and grief, we are called to say ‘yes.’

The choice is left up to us. We can say ‘no’ if we want to. But if we say ‘yes,’ we will be filled with joy, as Mary and Joseph were. We will be unable to refrain from singing God’s praises and dreaming God’s dreams.

Keith Wagner, in his book, Good News for those Who Fear, tells this story about facing our fears:

“One time there was a rancher named Lexy, in Montana, who was having trouble with Coyotes killing her sheep. She used electric fences, odor sprays and even tried placing battery-operated radios near them. She tried corralling them at night and herding them by day. Nothing worked and in one year she lost over fifty of her sheep. Finally Lexy purchased some llamas,

aggressive, funny looking animals which mostly dwell in South America. She put them in with the sheep and they grazed alongside them.

“Llamas are fearless. They aren’t afraid of anything. When they see something, they put their heads up and walk straight toward the source that is attempting to frighten them. The coyotes wouldn’t have anything to do with the llamas so therefore the sheep were spared. What is scaring us can also be overcome when we face our fears with determination and courage.”

Closing.

I read an L. A. Times article a while back about fear and laughter in toddlers. When Mom or Dad play peek-a-boo with a toddler, there is a moment of fear for the child. The toddler fears that Mommy or Daddy may not reappear. Toddlers love to play peek-a-boo because they are beginning to learn “that objects and people exist even when they can’t be seen. [Lawrence Kutner, a clinical psychologist, says that] while a baby is learning this, peek-a-boo is fraught with tension and excitement. ‘The child’ is pretty sure Mom [or Dad] is still there and will come back, but [the child] is not certain. When [the parent] does reappear, the baby laughs with relief and glee [The child] can predict the future. What was scary is now fun.” (L. A. Times, December 14, 1990).

Mary and Joseph teach us that even in the midst of all our fears, all of society’s problems, and all of the world’s insanity, God is still there. We may not always be able to see God. But we can predict with certainty that He will always be there for us. Therefore, when we feel despair, let us sing for joy. When we feel afraid, let us pay attention to our dreams. Let us join with Mary and Joseph in praising and trusting God. For Christ is born at Christmas. God is with us. Amen.