

Christmas Eve 1 Joseph, Jesus, and the Cross

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen!

Often times, when I am telling a story to the preschool children at chapel, the story will involve angels. And each time the Bible has a story about people encountering angels, it begins with the angels saying, “Do not fear!” But when I show the children a picture from the story Bible, it is of a very friendly, non-threatening looking human with a pair of wings attached. No adult or child would be afraid of angels such as these! So why do all the accounts begin the words, “Do not fear?”

In one sense, we should be afraid that angels will speak to us. We should be afraid because angels are mighty warriors as well as messengers and could be mighty frightening as well. And when they speak in the Christmas story, whether it is to Joseph, to the Magi, or to Mary, lives are turned upside down and inside out and nothing is ever the same again. We should be afraid that angels will speak to us, if we value worldly success and security or the honor and acclaim of society.

Joseph certainly had his own honor and good standing in mind when he decided to break his engagement to Mary privately. But he was primarily, we are told, concerned for her honor and perhaps for her very life. What Joseph learned from the angel in a dream was that his promise to wed Mary mattered, and had to be fulfilled, because it was part of God’s plan to bring into the world a savior from sin and death. This conception, this birth, was like no other conception and birth in all of human history because the child of Mary was the Immanuel, God with us, that Isaiah promised.

We don’t know exactly what happened after the dream—how or if Joseph tried to explain the miracle to relatives or friends—but from a human point of view, this was far from the solution to his problems. His problems, which would include a flight for the baby’s life, were only beginning.

That’s why Luther talks about this text as expressing the turbulent side of the Christmas story. Matthew introduces the cross to the narrative of Jesus’ birth, Luther says the theology of the cross is what characterizes God’s plan of salvation, rather than man’s plan of the theology of glory. He says, “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.” For as soon as the Christian life is begun or anything else of Christ, the next thing at hand is the cross.

The cross is at hand in our lives, too. Like Joseph, we have the Word of God in the midst of trouble and turbulence. The promise spoken by Isaiah and repeated by the angel to Joseph is not for him alone but is good news for all people: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel” (1:23). The promise stands sure, even when the Christmas season comes amidst suffering and loss, as it does today. Indeed, the story of Joseph as told in Matthew serves as an antidote to an overly sentimental Christmas. Yet what we have in this text is not a bucket of cold water that douses our celebration. Rather, we have the living water of God’s promises fulfilled—the real reason we celebrate.

Joseph didn’t anticipate any of this. He didn’t want any of this. It was a scary thing to think about, raising the Messiah of the world! If this child is going to save the world, and Satan wanted Him dead, then Joseph had the responsibility to protect this child! But what did the angel say to him? “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.”

Don’t be afraid? I’d be terrified! But remember, this was an angel, a powerful angel who had appeared to Joseph. Those angels would be with Joseph throughout his life. They would warn Joseph to leave from Bethlehem, keeping ahead of Herod. They would protect Joseph on the way to Egypt. God would provide. God worked faith in his heart, and that changed Joseph’s life. Joseph understood that baby in Mary’s womb was His Savior. Joseph wasn’t in it alone.

We’re not in this life alone either. Life throws challenges at us. We have our own sinful and fearful nature to deal with. Satan wants to attack us too. But God is with us, Emmanuel. The same God who came in the flesh to sacrifice Himself on the cross for you, comes in Holy Communion. He gives us His forgiveness. He promises us His protection. He promises us life and salvation.

Life throws plenty of curve balls at us. There are many times we are faced with scary situations. We too want to give up and escape from the situation. There’s so much to be afraid of - so much death in the world - so much darkness - so many threats to our faith. Many call us hateful and paint us as bigots or closed-minded fools. It is easy to be fearful, to run away, to hide our faith.

But listen to the angels from on high - hear them sing about Jesus! God is still with us. And we too have the privilege to hold Jesus in our hands and in our hearts through Word and Sacrament. We know that despite our fears and our failures, we have Jesus and His forgiveness. We too, through faith and through baptism, are God’s royal children. We need not fear, because we have Jesus. Jesus changes the worst of situations into hopeful situations.

Jesus changes everything. He changes how we look at life and death. He changes how we look at ourselves and the world around us. He changes us from filthy sinners into His precious possessions. He calls us to be baptized believers in Jesus, His beloved and holy children. We too are sons and daughters of David through faith in Jesus. With Him, we have full forgiveness. With Him in our arms we have hope. Christmas is special because Jesus changes everything for you and for me.

And may the Love of God and The Grace of Jesus Christ and the Power of the Holy Spirit surround you this Christmas and to life everlasting. Amen!