

# “Fear (Not)”

## Matthew 1:18-25

December 22, 2013

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

“Fear” seems to be an odd word with which to end commemoration of Advent this year. The previous words we’ve contemplated – hosanna (save us!), repent, and believe – all seem to fit the theme of Advent well. If we were going to pick additional words which fit in well with our Savior’s coming, we would probably pick words such as “love”, “joy”, “peace”, and so on. But “fear”? Really? Really! Fear is all over the Advent story.

It all starts with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When the angel, Gabriel, came to Zechariah while he served in the temple to announce that he and his wife would soon have a son, the angel’s appearance shook him so much that the Word of God says, “fear fell upon him.” (Luke 1:12)

When Gabriel made a similar trip six months later to a young girl, named Mary, in the tiny town of Nazareth, the appearance of the angel and his greeting troubled Mary. Gabriel must have seen the fear in her face and said, “Do not be afraid, Mary.” (Luke 1:30)

In our text for today, while Joseph is deliberating what to do with his betrothed, Mary, who was pregnant with a child who was not his, an unnamed angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. This angel senses Josephs’ fear. But this fear seems to be different. Joseph does not seem to be afraid of the angel. He is afraid of something else. The angel says, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife.”

Why does taking Mary, his wife already by betrothal, into his home cause fear for Joseph? It’s not Mary so much but the effects of the baby that causes him fear. Having this baby in his life, even prior to his birth, is going to cause Joseph problems that make him afraid.

First of all, Joseph fears that this out of wedlock pregnancy is going to compromise his morals and his reputation. For his beloved to be found pregnant before the time they were to come together as man and wife fully means one of two things. Either Joseph is guilty of unseemly behavior with Mary which will cause embarrassment or Mary is guilty of unseemly behavior with someone else

which would be worse and cause great shame for Joseph. Joseph fears for his reputation if he takes Mary into his home.

Secondly, one commentator mentioned, Joseph could be afraid of condoning a crime. Adultery was both a religious and civil crime in Israel, punishable with death by stoning. Would he be thought of as harboring a criminal?

Thirdly, Joseph likely feared for his personal happiness. How could he possibly be happy living with a wife who had obviously (he thought) been unfaithful to him?

“Fear” might also be involved in our Advent, as well. Despite our attempts to soften our image of God so that He is our buddy or a kindly, grandfather-type, there is much to fear about God. It is something the prophet Isaiah experienced when he was brought into the direct presence of the Lord. He did not rejoice about being in the glory of the Lord and experiencing His might. He was scared to death because of what would happen to him. A sinner in the presence of a holy God means instant death. Isaiah said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5)

Jesus speaks of the same fear in the gospels. Often, we fear human beings because they can hurt us. We don't think of a holy God ever hurting us because of our sinful behavior. Jesus says we should fear a just and holy God because of His judgments against sinners. Jesus tells His disciples, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt.10:28)

But should this baby boy in Mary's womb cause us to fear as he did Joseph? Maybe we have emphasized the cuteness of the incarnation to the point that we have forgotten that this baby in the manger is still God Himself in human flesh. While the circumstances of His birth will not cause us to fear as Joseph did, the ministry He came to do as an adult might cause us fear.

Jesus calls us to repentance which is not only sorrow over sin, but turning from sin or risk eternal damnation. This could cause us fear because repentance is not something we naturally do or even want to do. We are often quite happy in our sin. We don't want to turn from it. We want to stay

in it while trying to make excuses for it or redefining sin so that it is no longer sin. What will that mean for our future? Scary, isn't it?

Jesus also calls us to believe, not in what we can see and experience, but what we cannot see. This is fearful for many people who demand proof for anything they are asked to believe. Jesus calls us to believe that, long ago and far away, He died on the cross to take away our sins. He calls us to believe that He also came back from death three days later so that there would be life and joy for us after death, even as we see family and friends growing old and dying and as we peer into a mirror and see it beginning to happen to us. He calls us to believe that He conveys this forgiveness, life, and salvation to us in amazingly non-spectacular ways: through ordinary water in Baptism, simple words recorded in the Bible and spoken by a pastor, and through common bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Where is the proof that any of this happened? Where is the evidence that these means of grace do what they say they do? There is none. Scary, isn't it?

Finally, Jesus calls us to trust in Him and Him alone. This, perhaps, is the most difficult and most fearful. We naturally trust ourselves – our desires, our actions, our beliefs. We live in a society that is very distrustful of others and we often adopt that attitude of distrustfulness. We are afraid to trust others, especially if we cannot see that person. Trusting Someone and His desires, priorities, promises, and actions like Jesus without being able to see Him can cause fear.

Ultimately the single word "fear" is neither adequate nor helpful for the end of Advent. More importantly, by itself, it is not an accurate word to describe what Advent is all about. We will have to add a word. To rephrase the angel of the Lord's words to Joseph in good old King James English, the "word" for today is, "Fear not!"

Despite the embarrassment, the shame, and the burden which taking Mary, his wife, into his home might cause, the angel says, "Fear not!" Why? It's not because Joseph will magically be freed from the consequences of this situation. Joseph is to "fear not" because God is working out something far better than what he sees or imagines to be true. God's work will bring joy instead of sorrow and peace instead of fear.

First of all, Joseph is to “fear not” because he has assessed the situation wrongly. Things are not always the way they appear to be. Mary is not pregnant by reason of infidelity and adultery. The angel says, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” What seemed to be an embarrassing mess was really a divine plan.

Secondly, this was a special baby with a special mission. The angel says, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” This was Immanuel being born – God with us – true God and true baby. He would do what would seem impossible: save His people from their sins and the consequences of those sins.

Hear the words of the angel for they are for us, as well. “Fear not!” Things are not always as they appear to be. People often say the Church should deal more with “real life”, as if what the Church does is some sort of religious fantasy and life out there is reality. I say to you: what goes on in here is real life. The fantasy is out there.

Jesus, the Son of God, has come into this world to care for us when the fantasy failed us, when sin has crushed us, and when the effects of sin – injustice, suffering, pain, and death – have overcome us. Jesus has come to save us from our sins. How does He do this?

Jesus has saved us from our sins by dying on the cross. He has paid the price to remove the guilt of our sin. He has suffered the punishment for our sin so that we never have to suffer that punishment. By His death, Jesus has earned a right standing for all people before God. He has also provides the way for each of us to enter into and stay within that right standing.

Repentance is not something we have to struggle with to accomplish ourselves. Through the preaching and teaching of God’s Law, He grants us repentance. God causes us to see our sin. He brings us to sorrow over that sin. He grants us the power of His Holy Spirit to turn from that.

Belief, also, is not something we have to work at to do or have. The Gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ and all that He is and all that He has done for us – creates faith within us. Your baptism has washed away your sin and given you the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) who creates faith in your heart. The Word of God, as it is read by you, taught to you, and preached for you will

strengthen that faith for God's Word has power and will not return to Him without accomplishing that for which He sent it. (Isaiah 55:11) The faith God gave you in Holy Baptism and which He has strengthened by His Holy Word will allow you know that Jesus' body and blood are in and with bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. As physical food nurtures your body, so this heavenly food will nurture your faith.

Trust in Him and fear not! Impossible? No. Live in your baptismal promises every day. Hear His Word on a regular and continual basis. Receive Jesus' body and blood frequently. These means of grace are allow you to trust in Him, not only for what He has done in the past for you, but what He will do for you in the future. Saving you from your sins means more than forgiving your sin. In His resurrection from the dead, Jesus has begun establishing the new creation in which He will save you from the effects of all your sins. Despite what you see and experience now, fear not! Jesus has begun restoring creation its state of perfection. There is coming a time when there will be no hunger or thirst, sickness or suffering, dying or separation of any kind ever again.

We began Advent by crying out, "Hosanna! Save us!" God responded through John the Baptist calling us to repent of our sin and believe His promise. We conclude with two words: fear not. Fear not your sin for the Baby of Bethlehem grew to manhood and took your sins to the cross and dying there. You have forgiveness and a right standing with God. Fear not the future for the dying Savior has become the Lord of Life by His resurrection from the dead. He will rescue you from every evil aspect of this world and restore you and all creation to perfection as He always intended for it to be. Therefore, with the voices of the Church throughout the ages, we humbly and urgently pray this Advent season, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.