

## Advent 4, Year A: 19 December 2004

Well here we are again with the “other annunciation story.”  
The unfamiliar one or at least the one not-so-well-known as Luke’s version.  
And yet this version is every bit as important.  
Perhaps more so in a way.  
Mary was a direct participant, after all.  
The angel announced something that would happen *to* her.  
The Holy Spirit would come to her.  
She would carry a child. She would give birth.  
It was physical, painful, wonderful, *real*.

Joseph on the other hand.  
Well, Joseph is another matter.  
In the story of the birth of Jesus the Messiah,  
Joseph is only a bit player.  
Oh, he is a good man, even a righteous man,  
but he is not exactly directly involved in the action.  
So the annunciation to Joseph is...  
well, like the annunciation to us:  
somewhat at a distance,  
involving a leap of faith,  
a certain suspension of disbelief.

To Joseph the angel says,  
“Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.”  
To us the angel says,  
“Child of God, do not be afraid to take Jesus as your savior.”  
Joseph had every reason to be afraid,  
to doubt what was happening.  
Social custom, religious custom, rational thought:  
the event had everything going against it.  
The same might be said for us.  
We too might have every reason  
to fear giving ourselves over to the power of God acting in Jesus,  
to doubt the wisdom of such an act.  
Social custom, religious custom, rational thought:  
the event *still* has everything going against it.

Yeshua, savior; Immanuel, God with us.  
How strange. How foreign. How bewildering.  
Who could blame Joseph for not believing? Who could blame us?  
And yet Joseph had the courage and faith to go with the story,  
to act despite his fear and trust in God’s promise.  
Do we?

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.  
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

When any of us is asked to be in relation with Jesus,  
the process of entering into and growing in that relationship  
is the same for us as it was for Joseph.

First, there is a messenger.

The messenger's first words must be, "Don't be afraid."

We are not afraid of people when we know  
that they love us without question or condition.

The safety of the messenger determines whether or not  
we receive the message as Good News.

When anyone comes to a saving knowledge of Jesus' love,  
normally it's because someone in a safe relation with you carries that message.

The witness of an abusive parent is never trusted,  
no matter how theologically accurate the statement.

The preaching of a tyrant who seeks to control and manipulate  
never communicates the love of Jesus no matter how eloquent.

If you are blessed with a saving knowledge of Jesus,  
it is likely that you heard it from someone who loved you without condition.

You heard it from someone who does not make you afraid.

Holy Scripture also has a critical role in coming to know Jesus.

The gospel story assumes that the teaching from the prophet Isaiah is known to Joseph.

The Scriptures give us images and metaphors that help us  
to recognize God at work when we encounter God.

Scripture is the long story we tell of God's love, from start to finish.

When we are familiar with *that* story

we can recognize the patterns of God revealing complete love in *our* story.

If you love someone, say a child,

enough to want them to know Jesus in a saving and healing way,  
teach and share Scripture with them.

Then they will recognize the love of God when it comes to them.

So Joseph, based on the "no fear" message from the angel,

the direction of the message, and the pre-conditioning content of the Scriptures,  
did as he was bid: he laid aside his doubts and his fear.

I imagine, too, that he laid aside the theological niceties  
and the hair-splitting we would later get into over names and creeds.

When the baby came, Joseph simply took him to his heart.

Before birth, babies lie under their mother's heart.

After birth, a baby must grow in the hearts of both the parents.

Jesus grew in Joseph's heart.

Each of us is like Joseph.

Jesus must grow in our hearts

in the way that a child can grow in the heart of a parent.

It may be that the reason God gives us humans beings in the shape of babies  
is so we will have a chance to learn to love without condition, as God does with us.

It is likely that Joseph and Mary had the same feelings about Jesus  
that most parents have when they have a baby.

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There is a lot of hope.  
There is hope that somehow, the child's life will be better than our own lives.  
There is the hope that the grimness and danger of life will not touch the child.  
It may be that one way hope comes into life is in the shape of a baby,  
frail and weak at first,  
needing our unconditional love and care to grow to fulfillment.

Joseph hears an extraordinary message.  
So do we.  
The angel still says, "This child is 'God with us'."  
The angel still says, "This child will save us from our sins,"  
or—since the essence of sin is separation from God—  
"This child will restore us to oneness with God."  
The baby Jesus is a source of hope,  
not just for Mary and Joseph,  
but for all of humankind  
for all of history and for all eternity.

This is a big assignment for a baby.  
This is a big assignment for the daddy of this baby.  
This is a big assignment for us now.  
If Mary and Joseph had failed in their mission,  
we would all be in terrible trouble.  
But they didn't...and neither will we.  
Jesus grew up to be the absolute fulfillment of "God with us."  
His sacrificial love seen in his living and dying as one of us,  
and his triumph in resurrection, change everything.  
He gives us hope.  
The angels are saying to us, "Don't be afraid.  
God is with us.  
You are loved by God without condition and without exception."  
May we have the faith of Joseph  
to receive their message and believe them.

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