

“The Good News of Fear-not-ness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 24, 2009

Christmas Eve

Psalm 96

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 1:18-25

A young man and woman had been dating for a couple of years and, as Christmas approached, there was speculation that an engagement ring might be found under the tree.

One morning, a few days before Christmas, the girlfriend called the boyfriend and said, “I just had a dream about diamonds. What do you think it could mean?” “Oh,” her boyfriend replied, “you’ll know in a couple of days.”

The next morning, she called again and said the same thing, “I just had a dream about diamonds. What do you think this dream means?” And the boyfriend said, “You’ll know tomorrow.”

On the third morning, the woman called yet again, saying, “I just dreamed again about diamonds. What do you think this dream means?” And again, he replied, “You’ll know tonight.”

That evening, on Christmas Eve, the young man presented with a small package. She was delighted. She opened it gently, nervously. And when she did, she found-a book! And the book's title was “The Meaning of Dreams.”¹

The Bible is filled with dreams that have great meaning, which – for most of us who have comparatively unremarkable dreams – can lead us to frustration. Why is it that often we can’t remember our dreams and – even when we do – they don’t make sense to us or to others? Where are the angels – the divine messengers from God – in our dreams? Why doesn’t God speak as clearly to us as He did to Mary and Joseph?

But the fact that the angel visited both Mary and Joseph – as recorded in the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew, respectively – may offer us some consolation. Angels appearing to two people so close in proximity –

¹ Adapted from Samuel Candler, “Believe in the Dreams of the Person You Love”

living in the same, small village and engaged to be married – and yet two people who become so dislocated from one another through these extraordinary events.

Mary and Joseph were undoubtedly hoping – as all young couples would – that their time of engagement would pass without a hitch. They could not have envisioned an unplanned pregnancy, a decision whether or not to break the engagement, and the need to make a four-day journey and deliver the child in a strange town, outdoors in a stable.

These certainly were not welcomed events for a couple engaged to be married. Everything must have seemed perfectly ordinary until the angels and the dreams began.

Time and time again, when angels appear in the Bible, they announce their arrival with the words, “do not be afraid.” This has led some people to wonder whether angels appear not as radiant and majestic as they are usually portrayed, but frightening. But, the angel in Joseph’s dream already knew that Joseph’s fear came from somewhere else. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says, “to take Mary as your wife.”²

Joseph has valid reasons to be afraid. Either his betrothed has been unfaithful and dishonest, or else she has been hearing voices and seeing visions. An angel appeared to her, saying that she had been chosen to be blessed among all women, and Mary said she was ready. Joseph had received no visit from a divine messenger; he probably thought that his dreams for a perfect future and family had been dashed. And what would other people say; would they forever be talking behind his back because the son was not his own? And yet, angel says to him, “do not be afraid.”

This child, Joseph is told, will bring salvation to all people. He will be called Jesus – the one who saves – but, as the prophets had foretold, their son would also be known as Emmanuel – God is with us. “Do not be afraid,” the angel tells Joseph, for all of this disruption in his plan has come about in order to fulfill God’s plan.

Isn’t that so often the way it is: we make plans, but during the course of their coming to pass, they become delayed, disjointed, and detoured.

² Mary Hinkle Shore, “Do Not Be Afraid”, *Pilgrim Preaching*, Dec. 19, 2004

“Uh-oh,” we think, “this is not the way I had it planned,” and we become afraid. Our fear comes as a result of the uncertainty has thrown us off course. Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, we wish that things could go back to the way they were. Joseph must have felt the same way – as if his life had become a wandering journey, traveling farther away from – rather than closer to – his original destination.

“Do not be afraid.” This will become one of the favorite phrases of Jesus in the later chapters of Matthew’s gospel. He will say it to the disciples, to those he heals, and to those who wonder what life will be like after he has gone from their midst. In John’s gospel, Jesus instructs his followers, saying: “believe in God, believe also in me.” Fear-not-ness means that we have someone in whom we can place our trust. And despite the changing circumstances of our lives and the world, God’s love for us will not change.

In order for the promised salvation to be ushered in, Joseph needed to trust in God and to trust in Mary. His decision was crucial because, in essence, he adopted Jesus as his own child, choosing to love him unconditionally. In much that same way, God also chooses to adopt us as his own, loving us unconditionally, promising to be with us in the good times and in the bad.

Just as the angels appeared not only to Mary, but also to Joseph, so can we trust that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us – not just to some people, but to all: to saints and sinners alike; not just in one time period, but in every generation: to parents and children and children’s children.

Friends, the good news is this, we need not fear that God will abandon us, for God has brought salvation into our midst through Jesus Christ. This salvation is ours through a trust in God: not a trust without any doubts, not one that can’t ask “why?” when our plans seem to go awry, but a trust that remembers God is always with us; can always take what appears to be broken and make it whole; what seems to be tarnished and make it bright; and what looks to be off-the-track and move it forward.

And so, Joseph took Mary and made her his wife. She bore a son and they named him Jesus. Don’t you love it when a plan comes together!
AMEN.