"When You're Afraid, Give Me Your Hand"

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Matthew 1:18-25 (CEB, adapted)

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary, his mother, was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. **19** Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. **20** As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. **21** She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." **22** Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

23 *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,*
And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(*Emmanuel* means "God with us.")

24 When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. **25** But he didn't have marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

This time of year, our society leads a kind of double life. Everywhere you go, there are festive decorations and declarations of joy. Stores blare saccharine Christmas music. Television ads portray people rushing to find just the right gift, gleefully tearing into a perfectly-wrapped present, or even discovering that someone bought them the car they always wanted, wrapped in a giant, red bow (who actually buys anybody a car, anyway?). Calendars are filled with holiday parties, family gatherings, and carved-out times to grab last-minute gifts.

But peel back the veneer of this fantasy, and it's clear that we live in a time of great fear and anxiety. Wars rage. Violence is rampant around the world, on college campuses, and in neighborhoods just like the ones we live in. According to a recent poll by Social Science Research Solutions, Americans across generations, income levels, and political affiliations feel unseen and misunderstood by their leaders.[1] And, in a poll released by the Pew Research Center last week, three times as many people living in this country would rather live in the past than in whatever future they can imagine.[2]

It's likely that you're feeling some of this dissonance in your own life, as if on a cosmic yo-yo being pulled from holiday euphoria to daily disillusionment. Do we believe things can get better, or are we trapped in a downward spiral? You may come here today, longing for a space where you can wrestle honestly with fears and doubts. Or maybe your desire is to find respite, a place where you *don't* have to think about all the terrible things happening in the world, where you can just sit for a few moments in peace and receive some assurance that there are greater forces at work than the forces of fear.

We cannot make our fears disappear, and we can only ignore them for so long. Church isn't a place we go to pretend everything is okay when it isn't. And I don't want us to feed into the Pollyanna culture of the world around us. But it is and must be a place where we encounter peace and renewed hope. What we seek is a mature faith that faces our doubts and

fears, leans on the eternal promises and faithfulness of God, and leads us to real and lasting hope. So, let's take this time together to build solidarity as we walk toward the future.

Prayer: *O Come, Desire of Nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind.*
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease. Fill the whole world with heavenly peace.

In this season of Advent, we remember the words of the prophets who offered a sometimes brutally honest assessment of the world in which they lived. But they also offered a vision of a world restored, where justice would prevail and God's presence would be with God's people forever. Their words remind us that what we feel is not new, that others have faced far worse and emerged with restored hope and renewed resolve.

We also reflect on the stories surrounding Jesus's birth. We think about Mary who, as a young bride-to-be, was told that she would have a child by the Holy Spirit. Mary faced many risks: being rejected by her fiancée, being condemned by her family, sacrificing her plans and her dreams, and possibly putting her own life in peril. Despite all that, she faced her fears and answered, "Let it be just as you have said."

Today we turn to Joseph, Mary's betrothed. By this point, Joseph had learned that Mary was pregnant. She had told him what happened, though we wonder what he thought of her story. He knew only one thing for certain: *this baby was not his*. He debated what to do. Should he go public, subjecting Mary to religious and legal judgment? Should he go ahead with the wedding, enduring the stigma of a premarital pregnancy for a child that wasn't his? He didn't want to hurt Mary, but decided he simply couldn't go through with it. He would break it off quietly, freeing himself from obligation but allowing Mary a chance to figure it out for herself. Matthew tells us the reason Joseph wanted to protect Mary was because he was a righteous man. In biblical terms, righteousness equates to justice. But justice, in this case, was murky at best. If Mary had been with another man while they were engaged, she had not only broken his heart, but the law as well. No, Joseph's motivation must have been more than righteousness, more than personal integrity. His actions revealed that he was deeply compassionate: even if he had been wronged, he would not hurt Mary. He would break off their engagement quietly.

That night, an angel visited Joseph in a dream. Guess what the angel said first? "*Don't be afraid*." But unlike the angels that appeared in Luke's gospel, *this* angel offered a *reason* not to be afraid: "The child Mary carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit." Mary was telling the truth. Joseph need not be afraid to marry her and build a life together.

But there were other reasons to be afraid. Joseph was afraid for Mary. He had been afraid of what would become of her if they didn't get married, but also if they did. Who would believe her story? He had to act as if the child was his – for her safety and for the safety of Jesus. Even so, by continuing with their plans, they both would be subjected to social stigma – enduring the endless whispers of their neighbors. They risked religious judgment – would Joseph still be welcome in the synagogue after this? They risked political jeopardy – the angel's message was a messianic declaration; if word got out, Herod would be on high alert. As we discover in the following verses, Herod would indeed be watching. And he would resort to deception, surveillance, and eventually violence to try to prevent Jesus from threatening his place on the throne.

Joseph heard God's invitation and joined Mary in responding with faith. They both said yes individually, but they were stronger together. In the Bible, their relationship doesn't get much attention, but it is one worth reflecting on. What words and emotions were exchanged

between them throughout this time? How did they navigate the complexities of marriage and family, the honor and challenge of raising God's child, and the risks they faced in Nazareth, under Herod's paranoia, fleeing to Egypt as refugees, and the life they would build together?

Let's be clear: Joseph is not the hero of this story. Yes, he acted with integrity and compassion. But he didn't "fix" the problem. He didn't take away the risk. What he did was join Mary in her risk and walk with her. God had already been at work. Angels had visited. Mary was pregnant. This was merely the next step. But Joseph willingly became part of the story.

Mary and Joseph deserve our admiration, but also our attention. As we discovered last week, Mary serves as a model of trust, deep engagement, and faith. Joseph, too, demonstrates great faith and determination. More than that, he is an example of solidarity and presence.

Presence is often the greatest gift we can give. But we frequently opt instead for either charity or control. Charity has its place. Money or material donations given in support of a cause are important and greatly needed. But sometimes, giving can be a way of keeping people in need at a safe distance from us. What people need as much or more than our money is for us to show up – *for* them and *with* them. On the other end of the spectrum is a temptation to see ourselves as problem-solvers who swoop in to save the day. We sometimes call this "parachute ministry," where people and organizations drop in for an event or a cause, but safely retreat to places of familiarity and comfort afterward. We are not called to be *saviors*, but *companions*. We are not called to *fix*, but to *accompany* and *support*. The most effective and sustainable missions are those that lead to mutuality and shared experience. We should never presume we know what people need in their own lived realities better than they do.

We have some strong examples of ministries of solidarity to draw on. When tens of thousands of Ukrainian nationals were displaced after Russia invaded in 2022, Church of the Saviour pulled together a team to help. They identified an apartment, furnished it, and secured funding for rent, food, clothing, and other necessities. But the team didn't stop there. They set up a rotation of drivers to take their daughter to school, to help with the younger children, and to accompany the parents to appointments or to go shopping. They made a point to invite the family to events at church and around the community, sitting with them and helping them feel at home. Even while all that was happening, they adopted a *second family*.

Another example is our local mission team. They have shifted away from functioning as a grantmaking body to focus on hands-on mission, identifying parters and places of impact, then matching people with opportunities. The dollars follow the engagement.

Kairos Prison Ministry is built on solidarity, even with those living behind bars. They do more than just solicit donations of cookies and yarn and money. They have built an ongoing connection of men committed to going inside the prison for a weekend spiritual retreat, a team on the outside to support families of those who are incarcerated, and dozens of others who commit to praying around the clock during the Kairos weekend. And it's more than just a weekend, as many team members attend monthly prayer-and-share gatherings with inmates and maintain correspondence with them over months or even years.

What might we learn from these successes and apply to other opportunities? Our Little Free Pantry has been a tremendous blessing at a time of increased need. What if we went further than putting items in a box *outside* and also invited people *inside* for a monthly community meal? What if we could commit as a congregation to be all-in on the COTS Loves Cedar Lee

initiative, filling neighborhood restaurants and shops the first weekend of every month? What if, in addition to taking poinsettias at Christmas to homebound seniors or having a designated team to do our "caring" ministry, we created a network for phone calls, visits, and transportation to ensure that no one at Church of the Saviour ever felt forgotten because their life circumstances have changed? How else might we offer the gift of our presence and stand in solidarity with our neighbors? How else might your church family show up *for you*?

Solidarity requires risk. It requires commitment. And, let's be clear, there are many forces in this world that do not want people to act in solidarity. In her book, *The Sum of Us,* Heather McGhee traces a long history of fear being used to keep people from coming together for mutual support. People and institutions that benefit from systems of oppression know that if they keep people divided, it is easier for them to maintain their grip on power. They push a zero-sum mentality to create the belief that a gain for one group of people means a loss for others. By pitting marginalized groups against each other, they convince them to oppose things that would benefit themselves as well as those "other" people. She offers several examples: Automobile manufacturers discourage organized labor by creating different stratifications among workers, cloaking their efforts in secrecy, and sowing racial division among their employees. Cities across the south in the 1960s bulldozed parks and filled in swimming pools rather than comply with orders to desegregate. Over the past decade, citizens in several states supported restricting access to polls and purging voter rolls despite very little evidence of voter fraud. Many of those changes were clearly designed to harm communities of color more than others, but they hurt all of us. But McGhee points to a different calculus, one based on the benefits of working together. She calls it the "solidarity dividend:" gains that benefit everyone when we reject zero-sum thinking and stand together across lines of difference.

There are still Herods among us today, stoking fear and division, promoting culture wars, amplifying misinformation to keep us so busy fighting with each other that we overlook the injustice they perpetrate. We have a choice – we can listen to the noise and give in to fear, or risk relationship and stand in solidarity to build a better future together. Who needs us to show up for them and with them? Immigrants? Our LGBTQ neighbors? Our Jewish neighbors? Our Palestinian neighbors? People who lack adequate housing, a livable wage, or access to healthcare? It is easier to stay at a distance, to remain divided, stick to taking care of ourselves, and ignore the struggles of those around us. But even if we are never visited by angels, we know the stories those who were. Their stories are part of our story, part of our identity as followers of Jesus. *Do not be afraid.*

It can be scary to get too close, but there is risk in staying at a distance, too. The story of Joseph invites us to think about the ways we are being called to set aside our fear and take a risk. There are people all around us who carry a heavy weight – loneliness, anxiety, and fear. Feeling bad, dropping some coins in a kettle, or even praying for them doesn't require much risk. But our prayers need hands and feet, too. Where are we being asked to show up for others? What does our faith ask us to risk? When you're afraid, give me your hand. Amen.

CHURCH *of the* SAVIOUR