

*Angels Among Us****“Do Not Be Afraid - #morejoy”***

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

On this third Sunday of Advent, with Christmas just around the corner, we turn to the theme of ‘joy’ in eager anticipation of the birth of the Christ-child. Google defines ‘joy’ as “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness’ while the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as an “emotion evoked by one’s well-being, success or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.”

We can use the word to describe many different circumstances in our lives: You may be overjoyed at the news of something big like finally receiving your US citizenship, or getting that job promotion or bonus for your accomplishments at work. Maybe you are joyous this morning for another school semester successfully completed, or a surgery that has gone well, a cancer in remission. Or maybe news of an engagement, a pregnancy, a birth of a baby has brought a spark of joy into your life. We even derive joy in small things like getting to your destination safely and on time despite heavy traffic, or finding a great bargain while out shopping.

And, it is not too difficult to associate joy with the season of Advent. You hear beautiful Christmas music everywhere, there are sparkling Christmas lights and decorations all around, and you are met with cheerful holiday/Christmas greetings wherever you go! The general mood is happy, joyful, and festive.

As our African Fellowship Choir members beautifully sang just a few minutes ago, during this season of Advent and Christmas, we’ve got joy like a river/fountain. People are more generous and smile more readily this time of year, whether or not they are Christians.

For us Christians, however, ‘joy’ is much more than a fleeting emotion based on temporary circumstances. Our joy is not rooted in our successes, or achievements, or other instances of tremendous good fortune. In fact, it is not based on what is happening immediately in our lives. Instead, it is a gift of God for us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In his letter to Galatians (5:22-23), the apostle Paul lists ‘joy’ as one of the 9 fruits of the Holy Spirit (The other 8 fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). If the joy we have in our hearts is a gift of God and a fruit of the Holy Spirit, it is not a feeling that is dependent on external circumstances. This means we, Christian believers, can rejoice in all things that we encounter as we journey through life -- in both good times and bad times. Actually, it is this kind of joy we find referenced in the Bible, and it is this kind of joy that we are all called to practice.

James 1:2-4 says, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but **joy**, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

1 Peter 1:6-9 says, "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith - being more precious than gold that, though perishable is tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

James and Peter are saying basically the same thing here: when you are faced with trials, rejoice! But, how can we possibly do that? How can you find joy when nothing appears to be going right, in the midst of terrible hardships and painful circumstances?

In his article, "Joy and the Good Life," Miroslav Volf, professor of systematic theology at Yale Divinity School addresses the theme of joy and suffering. He says, "*But can a person who suffers rejoice? Surprisingly, the answer is, yes: we can suffer and rejoice at the same time. Of course, we don't rejoice because of suffering, either of our own suffering or somebody else's; such joy would be either masochistic or mean. When we rejoice while suffering, it is because of some good that is ours despite the suffering (for instance, God's character, deeds and the promise of redemption) or because of a good the suffering will produce (for instance, a child for a mother in childbirth). Put more abstractly, 'joy despite' is possible on account of 'joy because.'*"

"Joy despite the suffering," that's what comes to my mind when I imagine the heart of Joseph, as we reflect on the Scripture for this morning. Joseph, the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus is often called 'the forgotten character' of the Christmas story. The Bible does not say much about him -- there is no record in the Bible of anything that he ever said. In fact, after Jesus' adolescent years, we don't hear anything else about him. Yet, we can tell that the role Joseph played in Jesus' life was significant.

Through him, Jesus' royal lineage as a descendent of King David was established. He passed on his carpentry trade to Jesus. He raised Jesus in the Jewish traditions of his time and taught him about religious observances. By his own example, Joseph taught Jesus what a life of integrity, righteousness and compassion looked like.

Let's put ourselves in Joseph's shoes. He probably thought his life was securely planned out because both his marriage and vocation were nicely arranged for him. He was a carpenter and was engaged to be married to Mary. He was looking forward to the day of his wedding and creating a family of his own. Then, one day, out of the blue, his world came crumbling down when he discovered that his fiancée was pregnant. And here was Mary insisting that she had never been unfaithful to him and that she had become pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Can you imagine how he must have felt? His broken heart, filled with mixed emotions of shock, confusion, betrayal, disappointment, sadness, anger, grief, disgrace, and shame... Imagine all the thoughts that went through his mind. 'Divinely impregnated? Who would believe such nonsense? It's impossible. But, I know my fiancée. She is a good woman. She is a woman of faith. She would never have done anything that would bring shame upon me or her family. She would never betray me. Yet, she has. She is now pregnant. The

child growing in her body is not mine! And if I know that, it means her neighbors who have seen her know that too!’

In that situation, Joseph had every right to dismiss Mary and put her to public disgrace. But, he was a righteous and kind man. He decided to quietly break off the engagement so that Mary could be spared public disgrace and shame. Actually, under Jewish law, Mary could have been put to death by stoning. In today’s world, an engagement is between two individuals. And, when it is broken off for whatever reason, it is not a big deal. But, in the Jewish tradition of Jesus’ time, an engagement was far more serious. It involved both families and almost carried the same weight of marriage itself. It was an unbreakable pledge to marry. Breaking off an engagement would have been a very traumatic experience for both parties involved.

It was when Joseph had made up his mind to dismiss Mary quietly that the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel confirmed the incredible story Mary had told him: The child in her was from the Holy Spirit. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded him to do. He took Mary home as his wife right away. And when she gave birth to a son, Joseph did as he was instructed by the angel and named him Jesus.

The Bible does not tell us how Joseph managed to live with Mary, watching as her belly grew, standing by her side as a baby that was not his was brought into the world. But, we can imagine. We can try to picture how difficult it must have been for him to be there. Despite the angel’s visit, which made him change his mind about dismissing Mary, he must have still had lingering doubts about the whole affair. He must have caught wind of the gossip being spread about him around town, how Mary had began to show before he took her as his wife. He must have noticed the townspeople’s glances, the looks of ridicule, disdain, and pity. He bore it all, silently, not responding in public but sparing his wife, Mary.

But he must have cried out to God often, in private, asking the same question again and again, “How can this be?” “Why me?” In those dark and bleak moments, he could only rely on God’s word, which was delivered to him in a dream -- you are the guardian of a hope that was foretold in prophecies of old, of the coming of the Messiah. Emmanuel, God who with us, has come at last! Joseph could only make it through on the strength of his faith. Faith in that which was unseen, unable to be felt, or touched. As he turned to the words the angel of the Lord had given to him over and over again as he journeyed in the darkness, he must have remembered how the news of God’s coming had turned his mourning into joy. And it was surely this joy that sustained him as he confronted a fresh wave of bitterness, anger, and sorrow.

In the article, “Joy and the Good Life,” Volf also shares that “Joy is best experienced in community. Joy seeks company (“come and rejoice with me”) and the company of those who rejoice feeds the joy of each . . . Joyfulness can also be an aura of a social space, whether a household or a larger community, so that when we enter such a space, we enter into joy, and, often, joy enters into us.”

This morning, let us lift up the silent joy that sustained Joseph during his troubles. May we recognize in our community those individuals now who bring to our worship space this same joy, which is sustaining their lives through the challenges they are facing. May we rejoice together and celebrate the joy in our hearts, even when the circumstances of our lives threaten to leave us with bitterness, anger, and sorrow. It is news of Emmanuel, which means God is with us, who is on his way and who is already here in the fel-

lowship of love in our midst. And if God is for us, who or what temporary situation can possibly be against us?

Thanks be to God!

