

O Sapientia / O Wisdom - A Word on a Wise Father
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
December 12, 2021
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Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Sermon

The gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus' family tree, through the line of his earthly father Joseph, the descendent of David who listened to an angel who told him not to be afraid.

Family trees are strange things. This fall, as part of a continuing education program on the impact of family systems theory on church life, I was invited to tell the story of my own family tree. I texted my sister and told her what I was doing and she responded: Hah! Ours is kinda like an invasive bush. Maybe draw half a tree and say the other part was hit by lightning.

My family tree, it turns out, requires quite a lot of annotation and footnoting. In rereading the beginning of Matthew, and the story of how Joseph came to be Jesus' father-in-residence, how Joseph's lineage made Jesus a descendent of David, I kept thinking about the fathers in my own family tree.

Through the generations of my family there have been many kinds of fathers:

Fathers whose stories were predictable.

But more commonly, fathers who could say, this isn't the child I expected, and I will love them anyway.

Fathers who weren't perfect but tried hard.

Fathers who could say, this isn't the child of my genes, and I love them very much, and they are mine.

Fathers who said, this child is only mine for a little while, so I'll do my best for them now.

Fathers who said, this isn't the generation of children I was supposed to raise, but I will do it again with joy.

You have heard me describe my family tree as the story of the people who nurtured the people who nurtured the people who nurtured me, and this is so in large part because of the fathers who made deliberate and careful decisions to lean into parenting and to find joy when everything seemed strange and challenging.

When we look at Joseph, that's his role in Jesus' family tree. He made a specific and deliberate choice to raise this child with Mary. The angel told him not to be afraid and he rose with courage to the joyful task before him: to raise this holy child as his own.

It could not have been easy. Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man, tending toward compassion, wanting to save Mary from harm even as he felt betrayed. I imagine he prayed, that night before he went to bed. Lord, it's too much. It's too hard. I don't know what to do and I need your help.

And, mercy upon mercy, Joseph heard from an angel, in a dream.

do not be afraid

Do not be afraid.

Do. not. Be. afraid.

There is meaning and purpose in this situation that is in front of you. It is not too much. In this family, in this child, God's salvation will come. Emmanuel, God with us, will be born.

Though he did what he was commanded, I think Joseph had some serious spiritual work to do, between the dream and the birth.

And perhaps Joseph's spiritual work is our spiritual work, too. That is, to find courage when there is struggle, to choose love when we might first feel angry, to even prepare for joy when life is hard.

Our other scripture passage today is about rejoicing, and you might recall that Paul preached joy from a prison cell where he expected to die.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

This Sunday when we're preparing for joy, I turn to April Fiet, the writer of our Advent candle liturgy, who writes:

"the root of the word "rejoice" in the New Testament is a root that means "to lean towards." The word "rejoice" is also etymologically related to the word for "grace." Through the last two years of pandemic and change and fatigue, I have found myself leaning away – leaning away from community, leaning away from the familiar, and even leaning away from grace.

What if true joy isn't a firm conviction that everything will turn out just fine in the end, but is instead a leaning toward the grace of God that surrounds us and embraces us? What if true joy is receiving the delights of God in the face of life's adversity? What if "the fullness of joy," as Julian of Norwich puts it, "is to see God in everything?"¹

¹ <https://aprilfiet.com/my-thoughts/advent-for-uncertain-hearts-week-3-joy-at-arms-length>

Surely, friends, it is good news than an ordinary person, a person faced with challenges and hardships, heard a message of God's love and courage. God might speak a word of love and courage to us, too. It is good news that all the way through Jesus' family tree, God worked through real people, complicated people, and brought forth salvation. God might offer grace and hope even in the crooked and cracked branches of our family trees. It is good news that God is at work in the most messy and complicated families - like every one of ours.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem in the voice of Mary, giving thanks for the wisdom of this one who stood by her, and Jesus, through it all. Here is that poem, O Sapientia - O Wisdom:

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.
The Child's first cry came like a bell:
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.
The angel spoke: so it befell,
and Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
to you another gift was given,
your earthly father chosen well.
With Joseph I was always warmed
and cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
man's love it was that made me able
to bear God's love, wild, formidable,
to bear God's will, through me performed.²

² "O Sapientia" by Madeleine L'Engle in *A Widening Light: Poems of the Incarnation* edited by Luci Shaw (Regent College Publishing, 1997) page 21

May we lean in to joy,
And like Joseph, love in answer to God's own Love.
Amen.