

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent and today we continue in our sermon series entitled, "What Do You Fear?" This morning I'd like to talk about fear as a motivator for compassion and a call to action. Today we meet fear as an invitation to courage in the story of Joseph. We don't know much about Joseph from scripture, and his story only comes around every three years in the assigned, lectionary readings. However, what we do know is that he is "a quiet, unassuming descendant of the House of David" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). We know this not only from our scripture reading today but also right before today's reading at the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. There we find Jesus' genealogy, which locates Jesus' origins in the story of God's dealings with God's people (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*). 17 verses of "begats" that trace the lineage of Jesus all the way back to Abraham in the Old Testament until his father Joseph. I use to find genealogies so boring, but the older I become, the more they fascinate me. "Matthew wants to show us by this pedigree that Jesus is deeply rooted in the royal line of ancient Israel, for all the ancestors of Jesus are kings in Jerusalem" (Walter Brueggemann, *Collection of Sermons, Vol. 2*). Though a significant part of Jesus' family tree, the few times Joseph is mentioned in Scripture, he never speaks- at least not with words. Not even once, hence the reason some scholars refer to him as the Silent Saint (Michael Frost). Mary has a song. But not Joseph. There is no "declaration of faith nor clear statement of belief from him at all- not even a single line in any nativity play. He simply does as he was told. Joseph is obedient and for him, belief IS action" (Sanctified Art). Last week we talked about hope that trembles is still hope. The next step with this hope in the midst of

fear comes the courage to take the risk and to act anyway. Before I get ahead of myself, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

“Fear flows quietly beneath Matthew’s nativity story, though it is never far from view. It surfaces in Joseph’s impulse to ‘dismiss Mary quietly’ (1:19), in the angel’s first words, ‘Do not be afraid’ (1:20), and in the precarious world into which Jesus is born- an unwed mother, a fragile family, and an empire that meets any threat with surveillance, violence, and control. Joseph’s fear is easy to overlook, perhaps because the text highlights his dream, obedience, and place in Jesus’ lineage. But his fear is not abstract- it is rooted in a web of social and political risk” (Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, *Sanctified Art*). Matthew reminds us that “in fact, Joseph’s role in Jesus’ arrival is pivotal. It is his willingness to lean into the impossible, to embrace the scandalous, to abandon his notions of holiness in favor of God’s messy plan of salvation, that allows the miracle of Christmas to unfold. As Matthew makes clear, the Messiah must come from the house and lineage of David” (Thomas).

Matthew reports that Joseph is engaged to Mary at this point in the story. He is betrothed. Betrothal in those days meant that while the woman still lived with her parents or guardians, there were no sexual relations until marriage. However, once betrothed you were addressed as married, hence in today’s passage where we are told that Joseph was her husband, but he wasn’t yet. With a betrothed couple, like in marriage, promises had been made and promises were expected to be kept. Here we discover two serious breaches to the promise and thus to deeply held cultural values: 1) Mary’s becoming pregnant out of

wedlock and 2) Mary allegedly being unfaithful to her betrothed. “Pregnant and betrothed, Mary is already- by conventional cultural standards- on the social, economic, and religious margins” (Carter). Needless to say, the angel dropped a big ole mic in Joseph’s dream, upending this quiet carpenter’s good life and reputation. I imagine that Joseph awoke immediately after his dream. Wouldn’t you?! The little that we know about Joseph is that he is a righteous man. As a carpenter, I imagine he paid close attention to detail and was careful to measure twice and cut only once. Just one little mistake, a tiny error in calculation and the whole project would be off. Matthew paints the picture of a God-fearing carpenter who wakes up one morning only to find his whole world shattered; completely turned upside down- his fiancé is pregnant, and he is not the father. Yea, what was he supposed to do? There are no good options from which Joseph can choose. “If he calls attention to Mary’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might be stoned to death. If he divorces her quietly, she could be reduced to begging or prostitution to support herself and the child” (Thomas). Joseph was ***righteous*** which implies **his conformity** to the law of God, the supreme standard of Jewish holiness. Surely, Joseph was torn between care for Mary’s dignity, his own dignity and a strict adherence to the law- torn between his love for Mary and his love for God, and his own confusion over it all. If Joseph stays with Mary, he will forever be marked by the scandal of Mary’s illicit pregnancy, and by her ridiculous and even blasphemous claim that the baby’s daddy is somehow God (Thomas). Joseph flat out experiences the tension between the prevailing understanding of God’s commandments and the new thing that God is

doing in Jesus. Poor Joseph. Imagine becoming the talk of the town – and not in a good way- when all you want is an ordinary, quiet, simple life. Is that too much to ask? How heartbreaking for Joseph – the quiet, careful, righteous one to be treated so shamefully for shame he didn't deserve. Surely, he was filled with anger at being made a fool by a woman promised. Though Matthew doesn't tell us what Joseph was feeling, we must not overlook the humanness of the man or the reality of the context. Let us not make the grave mistake of sanitizing Joseph's consent, distorting his humanity when we assume that his acceptance of God's plan came easily, when we hold ourselves at arm's length from his humiliation and doubt (Thomas). In his anguish, Joseph, rightfully so, does not believe Mary's story until the angel from the Lord tells him so. And this is when we might imagine "Joseph, after hearing all of this, and taking the time to process it all, eventually saying to Mary, 'Give me your hand.' And then Mary offering these words back to Joseph. While Mary has already said yes to God, that yes doesn't make her fearless. She still needs someone to walk beside her. Joseph, moved by divine whisper, reaches through his own fear to offer his presence in a very scary and uncertain time" (Sanctified Art). *Give me your hand*- "might be counter to how we usually respond to fear, but what if fear can result in connection instead of isolation? Joseph moves through his fear of rejection and shame in order to stand in solidarity with Mary" (SA). Joseph could have called it all off and walked away, but he didn't. Instead, he steps in. "And Joseph's response becomes about more than personal integrity; it becomes an act of courageous solidarity. He does not fix everything. He does not erase the risk. But he chooses to share it

with Mary” (Lee). “This is what we might call a theology of proximity- where faithfulness means drawing near to the vulnerable and aligning ourselves with those at risk, even when we are afraid ourselves” (Lee). In the context of an academic course, Human Rights Attorney and Author Bryan Stevenson spent a month working with death-row inmates. “I got proximate” to the prisoners, he said. “In proximity to the condemned, everything changed for me. I found a calling. Decide to get closer to people who are suffering, marginalized, disadvantaged, poor. Only in proximity to those who are suffering can we change the world.” Stevenson continues, “Hope is your superpower. Don't let anybody or anything make you hopeless. Hope is the enemy of injustice. It is what will get you to stand up when people tell you to sit down ([link](#)).”

“A scholar teaches that ‘all flourishing is mutual.’ We are sustained by one another’s bravery. When we act in courage, even quietly, we widen the circle of what is possible for everyone else. Courage, at its core, is love in motion. It is the willingness to care when the world insists it’s safer not to. It is the decision to remain committed when every headline screams futility” (Cameron Trimble, 12.12.25, [link](#)). All the more reason “when fear becomes a crowd, love must become a movement” (Trimble, 12.11.25, [link](#)). Which is why Professor Cornel West says, ‘*Justice is what love looks like in public.*’ Fear gathers people around scarcity. Love gathers people around possibility. Organized love begins in the body. It shows up in neighbors who check on one another, in congregations that refuse to fall silent, in parents who teach their children to tell the truth even when it costs them comfort. Author Bell Hooks wrote that “*love is*

an action, never simply a feeling.” Real love demands accountability, courage, and the willingness to confront systems that destroy life. Organized love does not wait for permission. It practices resurrection daily—feeding, marching, voting, teaching, tending, remembering. It moves through ordinary acts until we recognize their holiness. What does that look like now? Congregations that don’t all look alike, come from the same economic backgrounds, or have the same callings and gifts saying to one another, “Give me your hand.” Congregations that organize mutual aid for the undocumented and the unhoused. Congregations where people of means are willing to sit down and eat lunch with those who have very little, even when they don’t know what to say. People of faith who stand up to others who talk hate speech of any people, race, religion, sexuality, etc. People who refuse to let cynicism have the last word” (Trimble, 12.11.25).

The first words out of the angel’s mouth, after calling Joseph by name as well as who his people were, was “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). Do not be afraid- words we hear over and over again in scripture. As we’ve said in this sermon series, easier said than done. God is asking Joseph and Mary to take huge yet different risks- to live a difficult existence by going against the grain of their culture and Herod and the empire. “In choosing Joseph to be Jesus’ earthly father, God led a ‘righteous’ man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God’s call required Joseph to reorder everything he knew about fairness, justice, goodness and purity. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman

whose story he didn't fully understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son (Thomas). Joseph's quiet act of resistance- laying aside his patriarchal expectation and legalistic judgment and choosing instead to protect Mary and Jesus- becomes a very vital part of God's liberating plan. In Joseph's story- in our stories- God is already at work. We're invited to join in- not as heroes or sheroes but as partners. We must ask ourselves what fear might we be called to move through- not for our sake, but for the sake of others? In what ways can we reach out to those who are currently going through something really heavy or shameful or who are quietly in danger?

At the end of the dream, the angel gives Joseph two names for the baby we celebrate at Christmas. First, "Jesus for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). "The Hebrew name Jesus is the verb 'save.' He will save from sin and guilt...death and destruction...despair and hopelessness...poverty, sickness and hunger" (Brueggemann). And the second name the angel gave for the baby Jesus? Emmanuel. God with us. Friends, there is this baby named 'Save' and 'God with us' who is coming into the world" (Bruggemann). Advent invites us not simply to 'be not afraid,' but to act with love in the midst of our fear. *Give me your hand* invites a fearless love that makes us cross the border (David Wilcox). Mary's yes mattered. So did Joseph's. So does ours. So...do not fear or in the midst of the fear- take the risk to act- reach out, stand beside, be present with...for Christ is on the way! Amen.