

December 12, 2010

the Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1: 18-25 “Making Space for God’s Surprises”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

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.

“Now the birth of Jesus took place this way.” So begins Matthew’s story about how God came into the world in fleshly form and within humankind. “Now the birth of Jesus 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.”

For some the story is received as the literal truth: that God’s Spirit hovered over Mary, a divine conception. For others, this story is history told as metaphor; metaphor being the only possible way to express the mysterious and mystical truth of the gritty presence of God in our human history. For some the birth happened much like any other birth; a moment in time, a woman in pain, a baby swaddled in blankets. For others the birthing is not yet complete but part of an ongoing process of Jesus coming into the world and into our lives.

However we receive it, we are more familiar with the way the story is told in the gospel of Luke. Luke’s story focuses on Mary, as perhaps the story of a pregnant woman should. But Matthew focuses on Joseph, leaving Mary and her response out of the story altogether. In Luke, Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel who tells her of her mission, who invites her to participate in God’s plan, has captured the imagination of artists for thousands of years. Yet when I went looking for paintings or images of Joseph’s own encounter with the angel, in a dream, I couldn’t find a single one. Somehow Mary’s story has caught our imaginations more than Joseph’s has.

I’m not sure, but I wonder if that’s how it feels to be the partner of a pregnant woman, rather than the pregnant mother herself: that you’re a little to one side, in the picture but off on the edges. I wonder if being the one who watches and waits, supporting but not directly participating, feels a little distant and disconnected, at least until the baby arrives and can be seen and touched and held. Maybe that’s why Matthew insists on making Joseph the focus, to point out that in fact, Joseph’s participation was just as vital as Mary’s. That Joseph’s willingness

to make space in his life, in his heart, for God's surprise was just as integral to God's plan as Mary's was.

And Matthew does it so simply, using only a few sentences, leaving us to draw out all the implications. "When [Jesus'] 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." In just a few words, Joseph's dilemma is made clear.

As a righteous, law-abiding man, he knew well the rules. The book of Deuteronomy leaves little doubt as to the fate of women who have had sexual relations with someone other than their betrothed or their husbands. "If ...evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst...If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death... So you shall purge the evil from your midst." (Deut. 22:20-24)

The truth of the Torah is that the law demanded Mary be executed for the apparent act of having sexual relations with someone other than her betrothed. This isn't just a morality play about a pregnant teenager. It's the religious and societal organization of a community seeking to be purged of evil. And Joseph was a righteous man, we are told, which means, in biblical language, that he lived faithfully according to God's way, according to the commandments. So there was no just no way he could go through with the marriage now that she had violated their covenant.

We aren't told how well Mary and Joseph knew each other, and given the custom in that time for marriages to be arranged, it's likely they didn't know one another very well at all, never mind being "in love" the way we base our marriage choices on today. So it isn't that Joseph is heart-broken at his beloved's betrayal, so much as he is shamed in the eyes of his community. But even in his shame, he still has compassion for Mary. Not wanting her to be stoned to death, he could still break the engagement without saying why, and keep his mouth shut as her belly starts growing, pretending her pregnancy has happened afterward, thanking his lucky stars that he isn't sharing her disgrace and shame.

Yet, Matthew tells us that Joseph was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." Not only is he a righteous man, he is also a merciful one. So he decides on the most gracious and caring solution possible: to "dismiss her quietly." He'll send her off, presumably into the desert, to another village, another people, where perhaps she can make up a story for her abandoned, pregnant state. Resolved, he goes to sleep.

But his heart is not closed, his mind and his soul not completely resolute. He is alert and restless enough to be alert to God's messenger as he sleeps. So he not only hears, but takes to heart, God's word to him, not to be afraid, but to make space in himself and his life for a surprising and risky plan. And he does, taking Mary as his wife, and taking for himself the

paternal privilege of declaring the baby's name; and in so doing, declaring that he has accepted the child as his own, has grafted him indelibly into his family tree.

Few of us here have ever been in a situation like Joseph was, faced with the decision he had to make, with the limited options that were available to him. Or have we? Certainly many of us have had the kinds of experiences in life where no choice seems a good one, that will lead to a good outcome, to happiness, to success. I suspect we've all known times when every option is bad and fraught with negative and hurtful consequences, and we've had to settle for the "least bad" of the choices. Times when we look at the world, at what has happened to our lives, when we look at our loved ones, when we look even and especially to God, and wonder what God was thinking, to land us in the situation facing us today.

What helped Joseph, what ended up showing him the way, the way of faithfulness, the way of compassion, the way of God in an impossible situation, was an openness to hear God, an ability to keep space open inside him for God's surprising and risky call to be heard and answered.

It is in that openness that he received not only the wisdom of the way forward, but also the gift of courage. It's interesting that the first words he hears are, "Don't be afraid." Whenever we're tempted to romanticize this story of God's birth, of the baby in the manger, of the angels and shepherds and inn keepers, it's good to be reminded of how often those words are spoken in Scripture.

"Be not afraid": God says it, to prophets and preachers, to those called out of places and lives that are familiar and safe, to take the risky path of speaking on behalf of God. "Be not afraid": God's messengers say it, to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds on that night, encouraging them to take the chance that God will be faithful in God's promises. "Be not afraid": Jesus says it to his disciples during a storm, and to the women at the empty tomb, calling them to make room for one surprise after another in a life with God. Over and over again God's people are told, not to be afraid.

So while God promises many gifts to Joseph and to us in Jesus, the gift of a baby who bears the very presence of God to humanity, there is another gift that the one who is God-with-us keeps offering: freedom from fear.

Photo: Rev. Richard Bott

The people who will whisper behind your back cannot hurt you, Joseph. Do not be afraid.

The storm tossing your boat, O disciples, will be stilled by the one who walks toward you. Do not be afraid.

To those sent out in Jesus' name: the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is greater than your visions of being tongue-tied when you attempt to give an account of the hope that is within you. It is greater too than the experience of being ridiculed when you manage to offer such an account. Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid even of death, or of a world turned upside down by resurrection. The risen Christ keeps saying what he said before, "Do not be afraid." God is with us, and God is with us for good.

And how will we know, that the risky possibility that is opening to us, is one of God's surprises? I suppose when we look at Joseph, we learn the answer. We know it is of God when the invitation, the call, is to help bring life, and all it brings with it, to birth. To bring forth life in the face of death. To bring forth joy in the midst of despair. To bring forth honour in the face of shame and ridicule. To bring forth safety and protection in the midst of danger. To bring light into dark places and times. To bring forth God, tender and vulnerable, a surprising and paradoxical challenge to all the powers of this world.

And perhaps we'll know it is of God, when it scares the hell out of us as well.

"Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way..." Matthew begins. The birth of Jesus could only happen because Joseph was willing, willing to risk not only ridicule, but also judgment, the judgment coming to someone who knew the commandments and broke them. Willing to make space in his heart, and his life, for God's surprising, terrifying and risky plan.

And the birth of Jesus can only happen in us, in our lives, in our world, when we are willing, willing to make space for God's surprises, surprises that may take us in difficult, challenging, even painful directions. Surprises that require every ounce of determination, strength and courage we can muster.

The good news is that when we open ourselves to God, to God's direction and God's courage, we are able to respond to life's scandals, trials, wounds, impossibly difficult circumstances, in ways that allow new life to slip in, grace to seep in, joy to surge in. So let us make space, this Advent, for God's surprises to be made known to us, and in us, and through us. May it be so for us. Amen.

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