

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
December 13, 2020, The 3rd Sunday in Advent
THE ANGELS OF ADVENT—THE ANGEL COMES TO JOSEPH

Many years ago, a friend gave me a Christmas ornament that I just love. It's Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and on Mary's robe are the words: "A Child Changes Everything."

There is another saying that also goes with this one: "Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans."

Joseph probably felt like both of these phrases were created especially for him. The plans were all set: He was engaged to be married to a young woman of Nazareth, whose name was Mary. Everything was planned, her parents had agreed to their marriage and Mary was making plans too. They were engaged, or betrothed, which was a legally binding agreement. It meant that Mary was still living with her parents; once she moved to his home they would become husband and wife.

But one day she came to him and told him she had news.

I wonder if she told him to sit down before she told him.

I wonder if she brought her parents, or came alone to his carpenter's shop to tell him.

Did he have any idea how disruptive her news was going to be?

Did she seem nervous, was she weeping, did she appear joyful, or hesitant, or scared?

He wasn't the first, or the last, man in Nazareth, engaged to be married,
 whose intended wife became pregnant before the marriage.

He wasn't the first or the last one in his village to think he knew the girl he wanted to marry, only to learn he didn't know her at all.

But this was unlike any story he'd ever heard from any of the other men of the village who had found themselves in this situation.

Mary told him she was pregnant, but she had not been unfaithful to him.

If the truth be told, she didn't seem ashamed at all.

Instead, she told him a fantastical story that an angel from heaven named Gabriel had appeared to her.

The fact that an angel had come to her wasn't completely unbelievable. The history of his people the Jews was filled with God's messengers, angels, coming to average people and powerful people alike.

But she said that the angel Gabriel had told her that she had found favor with God, and she would now conceive a child in her womb and she would name him Jesus.

She went on to tell him that the Angel Gabriel told her that that her son Jesus would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High God,
 and he would have a kingdom that would never end.

Mary told Joseph that she explained to the angel that this was impossible because she had never been with any man. But the angel said nothing is impossible for God and that by the power of God's Holy Spirit she was now pregnant with the Son of God.

And so, Mary concluded her story telling Joseph: "I told the angel: 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.' And then Gabriel went back into heaven."

Can you even imagine being Joseph in this situation??? Maybe it is the kindness of Matthew

and Luke the gospel writers, or maybe it was only the secret knowledge of Mary and Joseph, but we aren't told what Joseph said after he heard her story. We don't know if he was angry, disbelieving, or broken-hearted.

Actually, there is no place in the Bible where we hear Joseph's voice. His words were not recorded. After the story of Jesus at 12 years of age we never hear of Joseph again. But what we do hear in Matthew's gospel is the story of what Joseph chose to do.

While we don't have Joseph's words, Matthew tells us about the kind of man Joseph was. He was a man who followed God, who followed the laws of the Moses, and who still cared for Mary.

In previous generations the laws of Moses were followed exactly, which would have meant that Mary would have been stoned to death as an adulterer. By the time of Jesus the rabbis had eased those laws. A woman wouldn't be killed but there would be the public shame and severe penalties for her breaking the Jewish laws.

Joseph didn't want any of these things to happen to Mary. So he decided to divorce her quietly. This would prevent her public humiliation. She would have a child, but there would be no confusion about it being his child; because it wasn't his child.

But "a child changes everything," and "life is what happens to you when you are making other plans."

Or maybe in Mary and Joseph's case we should say: "an angel is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans."

So Joseph made his new plan to divorce Mary, and soon after making those plans, one night, while he slept an angel came from God. The angel told him:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she carries 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."

In the morning Joseph woke up to a world that was forever changed.

He followed the angel's directions and kept his marriage contract with Mary, taking her as his wife.

Mary moved into his home which meant they were married, but in the direct words of Matthew's gospel: he "had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son."

Matthew wanted to make sure that generations to come would know that Jesus was the child of Mary and the power of God's Holy Spirit;

Joseph was not his biological father.

Joseph may not have been Jesus' biological father, but he was Jesus' adoptive father. Which I learned this week is more important than I knew. It is very important in Matthew's gospel that our reading ends with these words about Joseph: "and Joseph named him Jesus."

That sentence is about genealogy; it's about what family Jesus belongs to. Many of you have talked about creating your own genealogies of your families. Many of you have talked to me about your searches on Ancestry.com, the country cemeteries you've travelled to, or the genealogies someone in your family has done, that you are now adding to with the internet.

Genealogies were very important to the Jews of Jesus day too. They were so important that the gospel writer Matthew starts his gospel with these words: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" He then traces Jesus' family from Abraham forward, ending with the words: "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

Matthew then tells the story of the Angel coming to Joseph, ending with: "and he named him

Jesus.” Names were very important to both the Jews of the Old Testament and the New Testament. In naming this baby, born of Mary and the Holy Spirit, Joseph is saying “I adopt this boy and legally claim him as my own son, a descendent of my family, a child of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a child of King David’s line.”

This is how Jesus, the Son of God, was brought into the family tree of the people of Israel; Joseph adopted him, by naming him.

A child does change everything, and life is what happens when you are busy making other plans. And this is the message of this third Sunday of Advent for us each of us.

Into the midst of our own plans for:

buying presents and visiting in-person or by ZOOM this month,
decorating and virtual Christmas parties,
Christmas baking and Christmas cards
Wrapping presents and family gatherings in whatever form they take this year,
into the midst of all these plans and more,
comes a baby--a baby like no other--a baby who is God with us, Emmanuel.

This is the season to let our lives and our plans be interrupted, and disrupted, by this child who changes everything!

This is the season to follow Joseph’s lead, and let the birth of the baby named Jesus change our lives.

The God of the universe has come to earth,
God breaks into human history,
God puts on human flesh,
for you and for me,
so that we too can be adopted--
adopted into the family of God,
adopted into Love.
Alleluia, Amen!

For background information on Matthew 1:18-25 see:

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011, pp. 92-97

The New Interpreter’s Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. VIII, New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 133-138.

Hamilton, Adam, *The Journey—Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, 2016, pp. 41-65.