

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“The Faithfulness of Joseph”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 15, 2019

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 fulfill 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.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open ourselves to the work of Your spirit. And we realize, especially this day, what that means. That Your spirit can do unbelievable and amazing things within us and through us. And so let Your spirit do its work now. Let it take whatever it is that is within us, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, that we've heard from the Bible, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Bless, touch, transform, make alive a word for each of us, but let it be Your word. Let it be the word of Christ enfleshed among us. Let us welcome that word and trust it, be guided by it, challenged by it, comforted by it. And most importantly, let it be in our actions and let it be on our lips. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Somewhere in the church are sheep on skateboards ready for the children's pageant. The costumes are laid out with care. The assignments have been cast. Everything is set. The hallmark moment is just hours away, not days or months, but we're so close to that 4 o'clock worship service. And I want to be the person today who instead of lifting up that hallmark moment of celebration, I want to be a little bit countercultural. I want to be like the spouse that informs you after shopping that the nativity that your great-grandmother had and laid out on her mantel, and then your mother laid it out on hers, and now you lay it out on the sideboard, I want to be the one who informs you as you walk in the door with arms full of groceries to feed all the people that are coming that the dog ate Joseph [laughter]. I want to take that praying, humble, happy, faithful image of Joseph, and I want to chew it up a little bit. And not because I want to destroy the message of Christmas, but just the opposite. I want us to really understand this powerful message of what Joseph does in the life of faith. And in a sense, I want to lift him up as an example for all of us. I want us to be able to ask at times in our lives, "What would Joseph have done?" and to lift him up as somebody that we could emulate and respect, especially, again, in times of crisis or distress.

It's hard to hear this story. So familiar are we with Christmas and the story and nativity and kids portraying Joseph and Mary and the baby, the wise men coming from the East. But I want you to imagine your child or your grandchild 22 years old. They've fallen in love. They're going to get married. They've sent out the save the date postcards. Everything is set. And your son or grandson, a week before the bachelor party, has to sit down with his best man and his best friends and tell all of them that his beloved Mary is pregnant. Imagine the conversation of a young man named Joseph telling his best friends who were there to celebrate with him that Mary is pregnant. I can only imagine the shock, the disbelief, the wondering, the questions. And someone,

inevitably, is going to ask, "Is the baby yours?" And Joseph has to tell them, "No, the baby is not mine." Imagine the energy that Joseph has, the outrage, the anger, the disbelief, disappointment, shame, embarrassment, rejection, you name it. He's feeling it. And then imagine what counsel you would give to your son or grandson.

As I've said this week and imagined having this conversation with my son, I realized that the first thing I would say to him, because it comes to me every time I sit and get quiet about it-- the first thing that I would say to him is, "You need to walk away." I wouldn't know if it was forever or for a month or a year or some season, but you need to walk away. You need to process how you feel. You need to see what she thinks. You need to see how the birth goes. You need to let all of this play out, but have no part of it. And in a sense, that's Joseph's plan. He's going to walk away. But before he decides to walk away, we need to explore the fact that in our scripture, it says that he was a righteous man, which means he understood what the law demanded of him and was going to demand of Mary. Because in Deuteronomy, it says that a woman who is unfaithful before marriage, who gets pregnant, will come before the elders. There'll be a trial. When the trial is concluded, and they confirm that she's with child, they're going to dig a hole, bury her to her waist, and stone her. She's going to be executed for her infidelity. But Joseph decides, "No, that's way too much." So instead of going the route of the Old Testament of Deuteronomy, he decides to divorce her quietly, to let her go into the night for him to go the other way, and for, hopefully, things to settle down at some point.

To me, all of that seems reasonable, if you think about it in terms of someone you know and love in today's world, that you just let things quiet down, and hopefully, dissolve all that energy so that both people can pick up the pieces and begin to craft a new life once this hurt gets resolved. Joseph decides to do this. But then, of course, there's a dream. And an angel of the Lord comes to Joseph. And like every other time an angel shows up in Scripture, the angel says to Joseph Son of David, "Do not be afraid do not be afraid. In the midst of the most outrageous anger and disbelief and disappointment and shame and embarrassment and rejection and all that he's feeling, an angel in a dream says to him, "Do not be afraid." In fact, there's only one other time in the Gospel of Matthew when an angel shows up. It's here at the first part in chapter one and then it's in the last chapter, the 28th chapter, where an angel of the Lord appears to a woman by a tomb. And the angel says to her, "Do not be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified." And then the angel sat on a stone. So in some sense, Matthew's whole story is bookended by these angels showing up, saying, "Do not be afraid." In essence, it is the thread that holds every story in Matthew and undergirds the entire width of the gospel. And let's be honest, Joseph has a lot to be afraid about. But the angel says, "Do not be afraid. Take Mary your wife. The child conceived in her is by the Spirit. She's going to have a son. Name him Jesus. And he'll save His people from their sins."

So in a sense, the angel's encouraging him to be calm, be courageous, be accepting, trust, make sure it's okay, be gentle, keep at it. Or what Angela Duckworth calls grit. "Joseph, have grit. Trust that somehow this is all going to work out." And so he does. As the parenthetical comment says, "All of this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets. Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us." In a sense, the gospel in that part gives Joseph his answer. For when everyone asks him, "Why are you still with her even though she's pregnant out of wedlock, carrying a child that is not yours? How on earth can you still be with her?" His response is, "Because God is with us." And I find it somewhat interesting and intriguing and probably worth another sermon or 20, that it's God with us. It's not God with you, or God with me. It's God with us. And in that last little part about God with us, it points to the fact that Mary and Joseph are not alone, that God is with them. And because all of us are with God, we are with them too. So when we're facing hard situations, even though we think we're doing it alone, even though it feels like we're all alone, the truth is that God is with us and because we believe, we are with one another. So we need not carry the burden of these unfortunate circumstances by ourselves. We can allow the spirit to be with us by sharing with friends and through prayer and reading. So Joseph wrestles with God, decides he's going to let Mary go. The angel appears, says, "Do not be afraid. You're going to have a son. Name him Jesus. You're going to do all this stuff." And then it says Joseph woke up from sleep. And he did as the angel commanded him. I can only imagine the energy of his waking up that morning. After convulsing in shame and disgust, he wakes up sure and certain about what he needs to do. And he begins to take those steps into what we call the glorious impossible, Mary having a son and naming him Jesus. We don't hear much about Joseph in the New Testament. This is one of the only times we hear his story. And it's not a hallmark story. It's not cute. It's not gentle. It is powerful. If you think about it happening in real life, especially when you allow the emotions of it to color your picture.

And so I search this week to find a modern example of someone who's got grit like Joseph. And I ran across a piece out of the Washington Post where the editors pick some of the best op-eds of 2019. One of them is called Living a chronic life in a fix-it-now world by Kate bowler. Kate bowler is a 38-year-old associate professor of history of Christianity at Duke Divinity School. She's also the author of Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I Loved. She got her PhD starting in her early 20s by

studying the prosperity gospel in North America. She went and interviewed mega pastor churches and their congregants to see what it means for them to believe that if you trust God enough, you will have health, wealth, and happiness. All of this she was studying, she was building a career, moving in the right direction. And at 35, she got diagnosed with terminal colon cancer, stage IV.

This is what she writes, "Three years ago, I wrote a memoir as a love letter to my family, a lasting gift to my young son after I was gone. I wanted to explain what it was like to try and perhaps fail to overcome my diagnosis of stage IV cancer in a culture that believes everything happens for a reason. I spent my 20s becoming the leading expert in the American prosperity gospel, the message of health, wealth, and happiness that populates mega-churches with assurances that we can all live our best lives now. I wanted my son to know how hard I had tried to live, to stick around to be his mom. But I was realizing that my expectations for my own future were based on a lie. Facing death at 35, I could no longer believe that the universe doles out what you deserve. To my surprise, immunotherapy drugs and surgeries have been wonderfully effective. Cancer used to be a daily crisis of soaring highs and lows. But in the intervening years, - I'm now 38 - it has become something different, something chronic some days my doctors tell me cancer is like someone who's lying there waiting to get me. And other days, it seems like the annoying neighbor who makes a lot of noise but never comes over. Cancer could get me or it could leave me alone. And so she's at her therapist's office asking, "It's hard for me to stop being afraid. What should I do?" And the therapist said, "Well, if you were afraid of heights, I'd take you to the roof and have you sit there." "And then well, so we get up to the top of the roof and I sit there, but what happens if I don't relax if I cave in multiple times?" He laughs and says, "Well, we'll just sit there longer." Life is full of surprises, both beautiful and tragic. But for those of us who've experienced the worst possible scenario, it feels like lunacy to forget the downside risk. Gone is the ease of answering questions such as, "How are you?" or the comfort that used to come from the lovely assurance that this too shall pass. It probably won't. I crave language to account for life lived alongside the fear that persists. So I sat down to talk with writer, Jason Green, whose two-year-old daughter he lost in a tragic accident. He and his wife, Stacy, made the courageous decision to love again, to have a second child after knowing what it was like to lose a first.

I asked Jason how he learned to take risks when he knew the cost. The decision to have another child was not a hard one, he said. It felt soft. It was the realization that grief only proceeds out of love. Speaking with Jason made me realize that the locus of my greatest fears, leaving behind my son and husband, could also be that daily nudge asking me to stay as awake to my love as to my fear. To say, "I know the world is full of things to fear, but our love will make a path." We will learn to plot ahead even though love itself makes us terrified that we cannot be without each other. Our society finds it especially difficult to talk about anything chronic, meaning any kind of pain, emotional, or physical that abides and lives with us constantly. The sustaining myth of the American Dream rests on a heavy can-do spirit, but not all problems can be overcome. So, often, we are defined by the things we live with, rather than the things we conquer. Any persistent suffering requires being afraid. But we hang our fears in the balance of our great love and act each day, as the love will outweigh them all. Life is chronic. Fear will always be present. I can only make those brave soft choices to find my way forward when there is no way back. In a sense, what she realized is that underneath everything, underneath her fears and her worry about her cancer and leaving behind her loved ones is the love that holds all of us, no matter what, no matter where, it's always there. And sometimes, it takes the grit of faith like Joseph had to work our way through those feelings of anger and resentment and frustration to allow that love to come and find us.

So I love the Christmas story. I love the image of everyone gathered around the manger, the angels, Joseph, Mary, the animals, the wise men on their way. But if we peel back the varnish, we realize that there is real power in the experiences that our people go through, Mary in her trust of God and Joseph in his. And so it is my hope that for all of us, we can look upon Joseph and say, "Thank you, God," for his faithfulness. And maybe sometimes he'll be a guide for each of us. Amen.