

Do Not Be Afraid...God Is with Us

John Wilkinson

Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

Some of you call them crèches, some of you call them nativity sets. We were, and are, a nativity set family. Growing up we had a set from one of the two now long-closed department stores in Akron, Ohio, O'Neils. We have that set now, which must be at least 90 years old.

We actually have 5 or 6 nativity sets, including the requisite olive wood set from Palestine. We have one where the figures are made from bread dough, and painted. I shared it one time long ago in a children's sermon, and a youngster dropped one of the shepherds, whereby it broke into many pieces. There was a gasp in the congregation, until I began to chuckle – it felt about right that such a thing would happen at the manger, and besides, who of us hasn't felt something like that at Christmas-time, either the dropper or the dropped.

Some years ago, our daughter began a practice of keeping all of the baby Jesus' from all our sets in a drawer; they could only appear on Christmas Day. Who knew we raised such a theological purist!

If you spend five minutes on Google, you will wish you had those five minutes back. There I found a Lego nativity set, an Avengers nativity set, Star Trek, Simpsons, Game of Thrones. I found, of course, a Star Wars nativity set with the baby Jesus being played by a baby Yoda. "Born today, I was." I also saw a very clever one where Joseph was taking a selfie of the holy family and the three magi were Amazon delivery people. The sheep had a "100% organic" label on it. It was either very funny, or very sad, or both.

You get the picture. Literally, the picture, whether a childhood memory or a family tradition or a slightly offbeat, not quite heretical cultural effort, you get the picture. It is about them, those three. They are not symbolic, or metaphorical, but real live flesh and blood people, with names – Mary, Joseph, Jesus – and with critical roles to play as this story unfolds. Bottom line at the top, what I want you

to know is that as much as we need to know about them, ponder their vocation and their role, how God appeared to them, we also need to embrace our role in the story, we who are flesh and blood people, we who also have names, claimed by the same set of dynamics and named by the same promise they were, so that we become so much more than onlookers at that ancient nativity scene, but active participants in this story that continues to be told, this story that needs to be told.

In that picture...There is Joseph. This is his year in the lectionary cycle. We get no Christmas narrative in Mark and John; Matthew highlights Joseph's role. Mary and Joseph are engaged, we read, not yet living together. We learn that "she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." All the questions we 21st century people have about this, the "how" questions especially, remain unanswered. What we do learn is that a young, unmarried pregnant woman's condition raises all kinds of red flags in first century Palestine.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a "righteous man" and was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. He would end the relationship. The Greek word translated here as "dismissed," and sometimes translated as "divorced," means something more like "send away." That is, rather than making a public deal of this, a deal that would have led her to ostracism at best and death at worst, he will send her away.

Much has been written about this, about Joseph's actions, his righteousness. What would have happened had he made a different choice, to stay with her in some way. That is worth discussing, but the truth is, Matthew doesn't go there, because in the very next instant, "just when he had resolved to (dismiss her,)" an angel appears to him in a dream. "Joseph," the angel says... "Joseph, do not be afraid...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

There are those words again, that appear time after time as some human condition bumps into a seeming impossible situation. Depending on how you count, the phrase "do not be afraid" and variations of it appear more than 100 times in the Bible. We should pay attention. Do not be afraid. Remember that. Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

Then the angel in the dream proceeds to explain the situation, which included the all-important understanding of who this baby was, fulfilling the prophecy, even

including his name, “God is with us,” Emmanuel. Joseph awakes, convinced and compelled to marry Mary, and in half a sentence, Jesus is born and named.

Jill Duffield asks the question, “why Joseph?” There is, of course, the David line that is established. But why Joseph? His decency and uprightness? What we do know, Duffield writes, is Joseph’s “willingness to set aside his own upright plans and embrace the strange message from God that appears to run counter to previous divine commands. The radical part of this story that we often miss...is Joseph's decision to jettison what he fervently believed was the right and faithful thing to do and instead step into the new thing God was doing.”

Mary is a silent player in Matthew’s nativity set scene, but not in Luke’s and not in ours. Author Kathleen Norris makes the wry observation that Protestants have a limited attention span for Mary, the mother of Jesus. “We unpack her from the box at Christmastime, she says, and then pack her back up again, with our other decorations, after the holidays are over.”

But theologian Cynthia Rigby writes that “The time has come for Protestants to recognize Mary’s place at the heart of the Christ event and consider what she has to offer to our theology and spirituality.” Says Rigby: “Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alike have argued that Mary is the model Christian believer, the symbol of the church in relationship to God. But these messages are incomplete, Rigby says. “(Mary) is also the only one who is identified as the ‘God-bearer.’ And it is in this distinctive vocation that she serves as a model for the church in relationship to God. She reveals what it means for us, in turn, to bear God to the world.”

When the Christmas story is remembered in just a few evenings, an angel will appear to her, with the very words that Joseph heard in his dream. ‘Do not be afraid.’ Do not be afraid. Mary asks ‘How can this be?’ upon hearing the news that she will give birth to a child. “There is no way, in and of myself, I can pull this off.” “Of course you’re right,” Gabriel agrees. Then he adds: “But nothing is impossible with God.”

Molly Marshall writes that “Though deliberative in her response, (Mary) trusted the messenger of God, Gabriel, and gave thanks that she had a blessed role to play in God’s great redemptive project. She was willing to face the contempt of her community to be faithful to her unique calling from God. Far from the

domesticated, docile image of quiet maternity, Mary is a courageous and strong woman who is able to perceive the mystery of God's handiwork."

Courage and strength. When an angel appears, perhaps in a dream, perhaps in the voice of a friend or colleague, and says "do not be afraid," I often think "that's easy for you to say." I try never to say it to someone facing cancer, or a failed relationship, or anything, really. David Lose writes that at church on any given Sunday there are "families who struggle with discord, couples who feel disconnected, kids wondering what future they may have, elders wondering the same from a different point of view. Some seek jobs, some relationships, some any sense of acceptance or worth."

That is to say, how can we *not* be afraid, when the doctor says I will need to take an extra look at that scan. Or we come to the realization that we are addicted – alcohol, a drug. Or a partner articulates that their feelings are not what they once were. Or a college acceptance letters fails to show up in your inbox. Or a loved one dies, and whether expected or unexpected, the hole is huge and the grief is real. Or a career falls apart. How can we not be afraid, facing an unknown and uncertain and unwanted future, like an unexpected and very untimely pregnancy in a community and era where such news was scandalous and heretical?

Lose writes that "It's easy to forget that Joseph and Mary were real people. In our imagination, Mary looked more like a blushing young bride than someone who had just given birth, and Joseph is calm, protective, and paternal." But we know they were like us, not lifeless figures in a nativity set, but flesh and blood people, facing all the human challenges we face, so that when the angel says "do not be afraid," to them, and to us, our first response is, "Yeah, right, angel. You have no idea."

But the angel does have an idea, so the angel does not stop there. Whether the figure remains in a drawer until Christmas Day, or has been in your nativity scene all along, the point is in the name. Emmanuel – God with us. None of this would be possible if not for that promise, not a hollow one, but a flesh and blood one. Not blind faith to which we are called, but deep trust. Not wishful thinking, but hope. God with us. God. With us. Not our best selves. Not our idealized selves. But our real and full selves, as we are. Us. God with US.

And even then, where fear remains – and because we are human we know that fear *will* remain – it is placed in the manger as well, with all the other things this baby will receive, and the promise of who this baby will become, so that we may live our lives differently, without fear, even in the face of the unexpected and unwanted.

God uses common people, ordinary people, like Mary and Joseph, as vehicles for God's great story. But more than that, God gives them resources to face life and to live it faithfully, joyfully, hopefully. "Do not be afraid" does not ring hollow because God's flesh and blood, love incarnate, is with us. With us. Us – we who show up at the nativity scene and find ourselves already there, with the shepherds and animals and magi and countless lookers on, then and throughout history, carrying our own fears and doubts and pain. The very point of that chaotic, noisy, messy scene.

David Lose writes that "God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people; God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death..."

Do not be afraid. Yeah, right. Except. Except God is with us. O come, O come, Emmanuel. May that promise be yours, and ours, in these blessed, fearful, wondrous days. Merry Christmas. Amen.