

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 20, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1: 18-25

## An Unnamed Angel Speaks to Joseph in a Dream

This is the third week in our sermon series on the Angels of Advent and Christmas. And as we move through the Christmas Story we see that angels are messengers from God; that when something big happens – God sends His angels to tell us about it.

The first week we heard the angel Gabriel’s message to Zechariah and Elizabeth – that they would have a son in their old age and that he’d be John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus. Last week we heard Gabriel’s message to Mary – that she would be the mother of the Son of God, and her response – Yes!

But then more needs to happen. Mary needs to be married into the line of David and that happens through Joseph. Mary is hugely important to all this, but so is Joseph. And Joseph isn’t so sure that he wants to be apart of this.

Remember, Mary has told him that she is pregnant, and that he is NOT the father. He had every right and reason to secretly call off the engagement (though betrothal in Bible times is more of a commitment than engagement in our time). Still the law would have allowed for him to leave her over this.

And so Joseph’s mind needs to be radically changed - Right now in fact - or else – no Christmas story, no Jesus. And so God’s messenger - an angel - speaks to Joseph in a dream – which is not an uncommon way for God to speak to us – not every dream – but some dreams are clearly significant and crystal clear.

And what’s the first thing an angel says when they appear? “Don’t be afraid.” But this “Don’t be afraid” is different from the last two weeks. Here Joseph is told not to fear what is about to happen, rather than the angel himself.

And Joseph’s fears must be many: Afraid of what’s happening in general, afraid of divorcing Mary, afraid of taking her as his wife, afraid of what their good and faithful Jewish families and society would say and do. This would be the end of his carpenter business.

The angel has to break through all these fears and barriers for God’s will to be done. But that’s not all. Because remember - Angels always bring GOOD NEWS!

And here it is:

*Behold: a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel  
(which means God with us).*

Not “A God” with us - Not a superhero with us - Not a mythic creature with us,  
But the living God, the creator and ruler of the universe – that’s who is with us.

I don't know if when the angel told Joseph that this child would be born of the Holy Spirit and that he'd be "Emmanuel, God with us," if Joseph could actually grasp the immensity of it all. Could he understand the scope of what this little boy would grow up to be and to do? Bring about the reconciliation of all humanity back to God and with one another? Accomplish the healing of all creation?

That's pretty big news! No wonder God needed an angel to tell him! Just imagine if a human - one of his friends or family, or even a prophet or priest - had predicted it. Would he have obeyed God and taken Mary as his wife? I don't know. (But these are fun questions to ask aren't they?)

Remember, angels bring messages of news too good to be believed - messages of miracles that tear apart our understanding of how life works. When God acts this way with humans, angels are needed to shock us out of our daily lives.

And they give us a heavenly vision: God's vision of what's happening and going to happen. Behold a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel. This is the good news - the astounding, overwhelming good news delivered to a worried Joseph.

God is coming - in the flesh!

And so the angel is saying pretty much the same thing this week as last week and the week before: Don't be afraid, I'll be with you and not just you but the whole world. Two powerful and life-changing (world changing!) messages.

Fear Not!

I am with you!

I wonder what our fears are. Perhaps they are specific - a date on the calendar, a conversation that needs to happen, a diagnosis yet to be given. Or maybe they are less defined - what's happening in the world, an uncertain future for your career or family.

Whatever it is, God's response is the same - I am with you! You are not alone!

May we, like faithful Joseph, be bold and brave enough to believe in this good news, this advent season and beyond.

Thanks be to God for this glorious gospel. Amen.