

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 3, 2016

Second Sunday after Christmas
Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:13-23

An Angel Appears to Joseph AGAIN

This is the last in our series on the Angels of Advent and Christmas. We met the angel Gabriel twice—first when he visited Zechariah, Jesus’ uncle; and then when he announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah. Then an unnamed angel spoke to Joseph in a dream that he should indeed marry her. Then Christmas Eve we heard for the first time from more than one angel, when all of heaven broke into song with the good news of Jesus’ birth.

The Christmas season will end on Wednesday with the Feast of Epiphany when the church celebrates the arrival of the Wise Men to Jesus, Mary and Joseph with their gifts.

And today we hear what happens after that: an unnamed angel appears to Joseph three times (again in a dream each time). My guess is we don’t typically think of this as part of the Christmas Story, but the “Flight to Egypt” is a turning point for Jesus and his family, flinging them from the safety and security of home and what they know, into harsh refugee life on the run from a corrupt and murderous king.

Angels, remember, are messengers from God, who say and bring the same thing each time they appear:

Say—Fear Not

Bring—Good News—which, until now, has been the promise of God being WITH them/us

Always this tension—between Fear and Hope.

Though it has seemed that Hope (and Joy, Peace...) have always won out...that the Good News overrides the fear: The child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit! The son she would bear would be the long-awaited Savior! And after the celebrated birth, wise men from the east came to worship and offer gifts to the Christ-child! Truly the Messiah had come! And Mary and Joseph were his earthly parents! It’s all about the future—blessing—glory—Hopes abound!

But today, things take a turn. Even the angel appearance is “off”—coming in a dream—no name....And the delivery is not like the others either. No “Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy...”

This time it’s quick and to the point: RUN! RUN AWAY NOW! There is not even time for the prefacing word of comfort.

This time it is all fear: warning and instructions... King Herod knew the child was alive in Bethlehem and was determined to eliminate any threat to his throne. So Herod the butcher issued orders that any male child under two years old in the general vicinity of Bethlehem must die. By the cover of night the family made their escape engulfed in the fear of being caught.

As they fled to Egypt that night, Mary and Joseph must have been reeling from the sudden yankseized by this tension.

And if we're hones —so are we. So much of our lives also resides in this tension between hope and fear. And there is no escaping this reality, it all comes with having a pulse and struggling with our faith in God and his call on our lives.

Fear, as I'm defining it here, is being afraid and apprehensive about the future and the unknown. It's anxiety which is closely associated to unbelief or mistrust. We know that a certain degree of fear and caution is healthy, because it protects us from real dangers that can potentially harm us.

But when reasonable caution, a vulnerable moment or situation, becomes an unreasonable fear, and despair for the future, then the Evil one is at work causing doubt and mistrust in God himself and his promises.

Fear is a like a beast which can strike at anytime and may take any number of forms. Maybe you are afraid for your children or your grandchildren for what might happen to them. Or is yours a fear of being alone? Fear of disease and death? Fear of what others think of you? Fear of financial failure? What is it that makes you anxious, afraid?

In my work with young people through the decades, I've seen this sense of despair over and over. Teenager —particularly vulnerable as they begin separating from their families as they grow toward independence—can experience an acute sense of anxiety and hopelessness about the future. The desire to fit in...

The stress of expectations placed on them...can lead to
Drinking and drug abuse / eating disorders / depression...which can lead to...
High suicide rates.

And these are not children raised in third-world, war-ravaged countries. We don't need to be refugees on the run for our very lives to be afraid. To be human is to experience fear.

The key is to be honest. Acknowledge your fears are real and give them to the only true source of refuge, Our Heavenly Father (Psalm 27:1)

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

Such truth empowers us to flee the bondage of fear and live in the freedom of hope.

I wonder what words from Scripture came as comfort and encouragement to Mary and Joseph as they gathered their things in a moment and escaped in the dark of night before Herod's murderous rampage.

Did they remind each other of the words of promise and hope the angels spoke to them before Jesus was born? Did the chorus of angels "Glory to God in the highest" ring in their ears as they made their way south?

Or in the words of another Psalm (121) - *I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?* In other words, In whom do we trust?

Which is a different question than, What do we hope for? We might answer that question with any number of things; Each of us has our own individual hopes and dreams for the future: own your own business, have a family, graduating from college, traveling... Our own personal

hopes may or may not become reality, there are simply no guarantees, no fool-proof formulas for success. Which is why none of these can address our deepest fears and longings.

It's clear, the gospel is not some fairy tale from the Middle East! The hope of Christmas has absolutely nothing to do with Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, or receiving the latest device, gadget or gift.

The miracle is that from his birth on Christmas Day to the crucifixion on Good Friday, Jesus, not just the son of God but God himself, lived among us. The good news is that through his death and resurrection your sins are forgiven and you are a child of the Creator. As radical as it sounds, God, motivated by raging passionate love, does this for you and for all of creation.

The point is we can have complete confidence in our God. We have God's promise that he will never leave nor forsake us and that in all circumstances God's grace will be sufficient for us. But, obviously living in hope does not mean we escape suffering or hardship.

What it does mean is that this living hope sustains us through good times and difficult times as well; despite the grave danger they encountered. Joseph and Mary trusted God to provide them a way to escape; and the hope that sustained them is the same hope we have in Christ Jesus.

Even with all the war, poverty, injustice, and discontent with which we are bombarded daily, and the tremendous temptation to hunker down, just hang on, or to run away. God says, WRONG! Because just as God commanded Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt, he also told them when it was time to return to Israel.

And this is what makes this angel message different from the others we've looked at. Here it's all about God's commands, God's guidance, God's instructions. God does indeed comfort us with words of assurance, Fear Not, and the promise of his presence; but he will also point us in the right direction - a new direction - and say GO! RUN! The new life I have for you is that way...

So, how do we know where God is sending us? How do we know we're going the right way? Well, I have always experienced God's commanding as a little scary and lot of hope!

In 1525 in Germany, the Protestant Reformation was only eight years old and with war on the horizon, the whole movement was threatening to fall apart. Martin Luther was a wanted man, he faced immense pressure from his own supporters; and many, including Luther himself, thought the end of the world was imminent. So how did he respond in the midst of fear and doubt?

He did the unexpected. Much to the shock and anger of those around him, Luther got married to Katherine Von Bora. His contemporaries accused him of giving in to the desires of the flesh when grave matters of the spirit were at stake. But the fact is that this was an act of tremendous hope and faith in the midst of great fear.

Today also is a tremendous time of fear and opportunity. The world is looking for a reason to hope - WE are looking for a reason to hope! As we begin 2016, let's not be afraid, because God is with us.

So let's go wherever he sends us, because I KNOW he doesn't want us to stay in Bethlehem.

Amen.