

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Good evening everyone! Thanks so much for joining us in Advent worship this evening. Let's take a moment to center ourselves to hear the Word of God and a meditation. Breathing in, and out. Breathe in the grace of God, breathe out the love of God. Breathe in the Holy Spirit, breathe out the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our reading this evening comes from the Gospel of Matthew, the first chapter:

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.

The Word of the Lord.

The things to which we are called can often be uncomfortable. We often think that following Jesus and being a holy and faithful disciple is an easy thing. And while being a disciple of Jesus is an important and holy and at its core good and beautiful thing, what is good and beautiful is certainly not always easy.

And when it's not easy, I don't mean in the way that physical, laborious chores are hard. While I admire anyone who can do uncomfortable and hard things in terms of physical work, like farm labor or manufacturing or construction work, the work of following Jesus is not always so easily tangible. Following God's calling and the life of a Christian disciple involves hard and sometimes uncomfortable inner work, mental and spiritual work, and that is some of the most important work we can do in our lives.

This internal, mental and spiritual work of being a disciple, is often uncomfortable, but yet it is the path to new life, to growth and deep relationships beyond what we could have initially imagined for ourselves. It involves trusting God so deeply that we give up certain illusions of control or false gods of what's proper or expected. It involves the messy process of letting the Holy Spirit work so deeply in our lives that our hearts of stone are turned back into flesh, turned back towards our humanness as God is always turned towards humanity. It involves prayer and

discernment, meditation and trust, the hard and deeply vulnerable work of the Spirit uncovering our gifts and callings in our lives.

There is a reason why more often than not, when an angel appears with a God-given calling or summons or new journey for someone, the first words they say are, “do not be afraid!”. Yeah, it would probably be pretty frightening to encounter a holy being with a calling to often take on an enormous challenge in the name of our God and Lord. So it is with Joseph in our story today. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and gave him the calling, the summons to marry Mary, to be her support and her partner, her spouse and beloved, in the midst of her hard and holy calling to be the mother of God with us, Jesus Christ.

Joseph’s initial reaction is to go with the conventions of the time, the easy route, to quietly cast Mary aside because she did not comply with the social expectations of marriage and having children at that time. He thought highly of himself, as a righteous man, for doing what was expected of him by the culture around him. But God had a different plan, a new and more important and much more difficult calling for Joseph, and it is Joseph’s faith in following God that allowed him to be the earthly father of the Messiah, God with us, Jesus himself.

Mary’s radical faith to say yes to God’s calling impacted not only herself but her betrothed and beloved as well. Joseph’s faith brought him to an uncomfortable but powerful and holy calling. What a world-changing gift the faith of these two people was for all people, and all time. Our faith and our commitment to the callings of God can certainly change the world too, even if it’s just our small corner of it. Following the way, truth, and life of Jesus is no small undertaking.

While it is easy, especially in this season of change and newness and what can often feel like limitation on what our lives used to be, to simply do things like we always have, this reliance on what is easy is not at the core of what it is to live a life of following Jesus Christ. Instead we are called to follow where God calls us, even if that means an upheaval of what we expected, of what was normal, of what is easy for us. Following the way of Jesus involves choices that can totally flip your world and your life, your day to day upside down and create something new that you never imagined. Following God in its discomfort and wholehearted commitment necessitates a reminder to not be afraid. But in that same speech of “do not be afraid”, there is deep, unending love of God with us. There is an assurance that what Joseph is called to do is part of God’s promises to his people, to God’s chosen people Israel. And there is the hope and joy of new life - a new life in the newborn baby, and in the new life that baby Jesus brings to us all, by the power of God himself.

I pray the brave, vulnerable, and faithful actions of Joseph inspire you on your journeys. I pray the endless grace, mercy, and love of God fill you with conviction of living your life as a disciple, even when the calling to do so takes you out of your comfort zone and what is easy. And I pray the hope, joy, and peace that Jesus brings will fill you in this season of Advent and beyond in your life of faith. Thanks be to God, Amen.