

Fear Not  
Matthew 1:18-25  
December 23, 2007  
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Have you ever noticed that God knows us really well? This might seem like a trick question of sorts, but as I was reading the Gospel lesson for today, I found myself reminded again and reminded anew that God totally knows what's what when it comes to God's creation. An angel appears to Joseph and the first thing it says is, "Do not be afraid." In some of the lessons we've already heard this Advent and in the one we will hear tomorrow, angels are always appearing to humans saying, "Do not be afraid." This is what Zechariah is told right before the angel tells him that his wife, much too old to be doing such a thing, is pregnant. This is what the angels say to the shepherds right before they hear about good news of great joy that is for all people. This is what Mary hears right before she is told that she's pregnant without having known a man. Of course in what we just heard from Matthew's account it's told a little differently. Matthew cuts right to the chase – "When Jesus' mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." I appreciate the fuller account in Luke where Mary questions the angel, whose name is Gabriel, he explains a little more how it will happen and then she accepts the task asked of her, goes to see her cousin, and sings

her rejoicing in the beautiful Magnificat. Not so with Matthew. Matthew shows us a somewhat startling scene. Mary simply finds herself pregnant. And then we hear about Joseph. He might just be the least-spotlighted clearly important person in the whole Christmas story.

You may have noticed that today's reading is from the first chapter of the first Gospel. Yet, we begin at verse 18. The first 17 verses of the Gospel are all about how important Joseph is, all because of his lineage. The first verse is, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." and the 17<sup>th</sup> verse is "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations." Matthew writes in a way that shows clearly that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. The prophecy was that the Messiah would be from the line of David (interestingly, the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in "David" is 14, thus the emphasizing of the 14 generations from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian exile and from the exile to Jesus' birth.) Matthew is very clear. This is Joseph's moment to shine. The Messiah had to be connected to Joseph's family lineage. The reason we don't read the first 17 verses of the Gospel today is pretty much to spare pastors the

embarrassment of trying to pronounce a lot of challenging names right in a row. I'll give you a sampling that I've practiced and think I can handle:

"...and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,<sup>8</sup> and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah..." That's verses 7 & 8. But the fact that we don't read it all out loud does not lessen its importance.

Betrothal at the time of Jesus' birth was the first stage of marriage, this is why Joseph is already called Mary's husband. Matthew tells us that Mary and Joseph are engaged but had not lived together yet and Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Even at the stage of engagement, it was considered to be adultery if someone was with someone other than the person they are betrothed to. Joseph was a righteous man and knew that the punishment for proven adultery was stoning to death. If he did not "quietly dismiss her," meaning call off the engagement, effectively "divorce" her, she could be found guilty of adultery and stoned to death. I love that Joseph is a righteous man. I love that he is faced with a very difficult situation and tries to do the right thing. Wouldn't we all hope to act like Joseph? Trying to save her life, he decides to divorce Mary. Then, while she might be a single mom, at least she won't be stoned to death for adultery. He makes up his mind to

do just that, goes to sleep and is greeted by an angel whose first words are, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.” Well, let’s see, if I’m Joseph and have just had the worst evening of my life having to choose to divorce my fiancée because she’s pregnant, and not by me, and I don’t want her to be stoned to death. Now I’m being visited by an angel who not only knows my name, but also the name of my ancestor. Yeah, I’m probably going to be afraid. In the gentlest way possible, God lets Joseph know that his resolution to dismiss Mary quietly is not actually the right way to handle the situation. Joseph is going to have to name, to adopt, this baby because this baby is going to be a savior. Matthew reminds us that this is just like Isaiah foretold, “The Lord of his own accord will give you a sign; it is this: A young woman is with child, and she will give birth to a son and call him Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). The Hebrew of Jesus means, “God saves” or “God is salvation.”

Do not fear. The angel has to ease Joseph’s fear before giving him all this amazing news. Just like the angel did for Zechariah & Mary and just like the angels will do for the shepherds. I don’t think it’s just the shock of angels of God appearing that’s scary. Although there has to be some fear involved with that, too. For these people, they are hearing words from God, they are receiving revelation about what’s going to happen or about what to do. We don’t have any angels, other than the ones adorning our sanctuary,

telling us not to be afraid as we come closer to the birth of Christ.

Christmas can be scary. Christmas can be a lot of things – exciting, depressing, wonderful, lonely, expensive, tiring, beautiful, comforting. But what Christmas is all about is God showing up in a real and tangible way. Our natural reaction to the supernatural is fear. It's so obvious we should be afraid! And more than that. We like to keep God at a safe distance. To live our lives balancing our guilt with our desires, trying to pay God back for the grace that we can't believe is free. We struggle to live as if we really are loved completely, without condition. We struggle to love other people, especially those we don't understand or are frustrated by. Sometimes we're even content just feeling like God is absent, but at least the absence is something we feel, which proves, well, *something*. But if God were here, really, really here. Touching us, talking to us clearly, walking beside us, teaching us. Not from the pages of a book written thousands of years ago. Not through a community we feel at home in. Not from a safe distance but from right here. Right with us. Yeah, this is kind of a scary thought! And this is what we're asked to expect faithfully today, the day before Christmas Eve.

This weekend we had a lock-in with the youth group here. Our CYM decided that this year's Christmas party for the youth should be a sleepover

at the church where we play games, bake goodies (you'll find some of our cupcakes at coffee hour, by the way), hang out, have a little gift exchange, stay up late. Lots of fun. Anyway, this time, they decided to begin by not being locked into the church but by gathering at Wollman Rink in Central Park and ice skating. A splendid idea! I'd never been skating in NYC before! Georgia and Stella and I came down from the church together and were walking along Central Park South talking about our weekends and our Christmas plans and the lock-in and Georgia asked me what was a great question. She said, "Why do you want to hang out with a bunch of teenagers for no reason when you don't have to?" My answer was that I love to hang out with a bunch of teenagers and that is the reason. Then I got to thinking, "Why does God want to come down here and hang out with a bunch of people for no reason when God doesn't have to?"

This is why we don't have to be afraid. God could hang out in Heaven enjoying eternity and doing the God thing, observing God's creation and revealing himself in the same way he's been doing for thousands of years. God could do that. But God doesn't do that. God comes. God is with us. God is salvation. And God loves this creation, each of us. And wants to show us a way to live that is connected to the source of our being and the author of our love. God wants to feel what we feel, think thoughts like we

do, eat food, feel hot sand under his feet, water run through his fingers, a hug, mud squish between his toes, what it's like to be one of God's own creations. We do not have to be afraid to God knowing what it's like here. Or of God saving us from thinking we're in this alone and have to live the way our society tells us to. Do not be afraid, Mary has conceived a baby from the God. This baby will save. This baby means God is with us. We are not alone. This is not scary, this is incredible!