

The Thing We Know Deep in Our Bones

Sermon for December 22, 2019
4th Sunday of Advent
by Pr. Bea Chun
St. Francis Lutheran Church



*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.*

Matthew 1:20

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come

Today we are observe the 4th Sunday of Advent. Now Christmas is just around the corner!

We have just heard the story of Joseph as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew. Now I would like to provide a second gospel reading, a reading from the Gospel according to James.

The Gospel according to James is an ancient manuscript that dates back to the year 145 A.D. It is not found in our Bible. There are a number of other Gospels like that, which have been written by the early Christians and which have not been included in our Bible. These other gospels do not have the same weight and authority as the gospels in the Bible, but sometimes it can be helpful to read them.

The Gospel of James begins by going into great details about the early life of Mary, and I will briefly summarize those parts: It says that Mary was an orphan who had lived in the temple and was fed by angels. She lived in the Holy of Holies until the age of 12, and when she turned 12, the temple authorities held a lottery to find a her husband, and the lot fell on Joseph.

And it was decided that Joseph should take her into his house and care for her until she was old enough for marriage, and then he was supposed to take her as his wife. While Mary stayed in the house of Joseph, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would have a child and the child would be the Son of God, and in this way Mary became pregnant.

So now, let me read to you directly from the Gospel according to James. I now quote:

*“And Mary was in her sixth month; and, behold, Joseph came back from his work,
and, entering into his house, he discovered that she was big with child. And he smote his*

*face, and threw himself on the ground upon the sackcloth, and wept bitterly, and he said:
With what face shall I look upon the Lord my God?
And what prayer shall I make about this maiden? Because I received her a virgin out of the
temple of the Lord, and I have not watched over her. Who is it that has hunted me down?
Who has done this evil thing in my house, and defiled the virgin?...*

*And Joseph stood up from the sackcloth, and called Mary, and said to her:
O you who have been cared for by God, why have you done this and forgotten the Lord your
God? Why have you brought low your soul, you have been brought up in the holy of holies,
and have received food from the hand of an angel?*

*And Mary wept bitterly, saying: I am innocent, and have known no man.
And Joseph said to her: Whence then is that which is in your womb?
And she said: As the Lord my God lives, I do not know whence it is to me.*

*And Joseph was greatly afraid, and retired from her, and considered what he should do in
regard to her. And Joseph said: If I conceal her sin, I find myself fighting against the law of
the Lord; and if I expose her to the sons of Israel, I am afraid lest that which is in her be
from an angel, and I shall be found giving up innocent blood to the doom of death.
What then shall I do with her? I will put her away from me secretly.*

*And night came upon him; and, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,
saying: Be not afraid for this maiden, for that which is in her is of the Holy Spirit; and she
will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from
their sins. And Joseph arose from sleep, and glorified the God of Israel, who had given him
this grace; and he kept her.*

I want to stop here briefly and interrupt my quote from the Gospel according to James, and want to say that when I read this ancient manuscript I was deeply moved by how much the writer considered the anguish of Joseph. Joseph throwing himself on the floor and crying! And how much the Joseph in this gospel struggles to do the right thing! That is something I could really relate to, because we all want to do the right thing, but sometimes it is really, really difficult to know what the right thing is!

Now, let me continue with the Gospel according to James: No sooner had Joseph decided to protect Mary than a certain scribe called Annas discovered Mary's pregnancy and made it his business to report her and Joseph to the authorities. Again I quote:

But Annas, the scribe ...saw that Mary was with child. And he ran away to the priest, and

said to him: Joseph, whom you vouched for, has committed a grievous crime. And the priest said: How so? And he said: He has defiled the virgin whom he received out of the temple of the Lord, and has married her by stealth, and has not revealed it to the sons of Israel. And the priest answering, said: Has Joseph done this?

Then said Annas the scribe: Send officers, and you will find the virgin with child. And the officers went away, and found it as he had said; and they brought her along with Joseph to the tribunal. And the priest said: Mary, why have you done this? And why have you brought your soul low, and forgotten the Lord your God? You who haven been reared in the holy of holies, and who has received food from the hand of an angel, and heard the hymns, and danced before God, why have you done this?

And Mary wept bitterly, saying: As the Lord my God lives, I am pure before Him, and know not a man. And the priest said to Joseph: Why have you done this? And Joseph said: As the Lord lives, I am pure concerning her. Then said the priest: Bear not false witness, but speak the truth. You have married her by stealth, and have not revealed it to the sons of Israel... And Joseph was silent.

And the priest said: Give up the virgin whom you received out of the temple of the Lord. And Joseph burst into tears. And the priest said: I will [put you on trial] and give you to drink of the water of the ordeal of the Lord, and God shall make manifest your sins in your eyes. And the priest took the water, and gave Joseph to drink and sent him away to the hill-country; and Joseph returned unhurt. And the priest gave to Mary also to drink, and sent her away to the hill-country; and she returned unhurt.

And all the people wondered that sin did not appear in them. And the priest said: If the Lord God has not made manifest your sins, neither do I judge you. And he sent them away. And Joseph took Mary, and went away to his own house, rejoicing and glorifying the God of Israel.

Here ends my quote from the Gospel according to James.

Now, you might ask: What kind of stories are these? Did any of this really happen? And here is my answer: These stories are stories, they are not history. But they contain some deep and sacred truth. In fact, I believe that they contain some truth that is so deep and so sacred that the best way to convey this truth is by telling it in story-form.

In other words, these stories are like a gift wraps: what's important is the gift inside, not the pretty wrapping in which it comes. (Unless, of course, you are one year old like my little nephew, who is right now utterly dazzled by wrapping paper).

Now then let's unpack the story of Joseph. Basically the story of Joseph is a story about a righteous man, who wakes up one day and finds that his life has turned upside down. All his life he has followed the law, and all his life he knew what he had to do; he knew what was right, what was wrong, and what was expected of him.

And then, one day, without any fault of his own he is in the middle of this awful conundrum; he has very few choices, and none of them look good. He wants to do the right thing, but it is not at all clear, what this right thing is.

Have you ever found yourself in such a situation? Have you ever had to make a huge decision not knowing how to decide? What helped you decide? What guidance did you turn to? How did you figure out your way forward?

Actually we have quite a few sources to which we can turn, don't we? First of all, there is the Word of God, the Holy Scripture; there are the ten commandments which give us a basic outline of right and wrong, for example they tell us: Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not harm. Don't take what is not yours. These are good principles to follow.

And then there is the golden rule which says: Treat others as you would like others to treat you; and do not treat others in ways that you would not like to be treated; and wish for others only that which you would wish for yourself. So those are some good places to start.

Then there are the instructions from our elders and our parents, and we can also turn to the example of our heroes and role models: what would Martin Luther King do? There is tradition, culture, and custom to guide us. We can think about what other people have done in similar circumstances. No need to reinvent the wheel in each situation. There is reason and logic. God gave us brain so we can figure things out! So we have many good sources to guide us, reason and faith and tradition, but there is one that is greater than all of these, one that outweighs them all:

It is the thing that we already know deep in our bones. It is quite powerful, but also quite mysterious, and it is known by many names: Wisdom. Sophia. The Living Word of God. In the Jewish tradition it is called Svara. It means that the answer is already there, deep inside our bones. And who put that answer deep in our bones? It was God! So when we pay attention to what we know deep in our bones, we are actually listening to God.

Another way to do that is by paying attention to our dreams. Our dreams arise from that same place, the deep knowing in our bones, which has been placed there by God. And so, listening to our dreams is another way of listening to God. That's what Joseph did. And suddenly he knew what he needed to do. And the moment he knew it, he was filled with joy and glorified God. Nothing in his situation had changed, Mary was still pregnant, the gossiping neighbors were still gossiping, the judgmental elders were still judgmental, nothing in his situation had changed, and yet everything had changed. Why? Because his understanding of the situation had changed. And the best part of all, the part that gave him courage and strength, was his new-found certainty that God was with him, completely and all the way.

Do you know what *Emmanuel* means? Emmanuel is one of the many names of Jesus and it means "God is with us". It is more than a name; it is an experience, the experience that God is with us in the midst of whatever is happening in our life. In our joy, in our sorrows, in our conundrums in our conflicts, in all that life serves up, God is with us. Christ was born to give us this assurance once and for all: God is with us.

Joseph experienced the truth of this promise even before Jesus was born: The deep and abiding certainty that God is with us.

And so, my prayer for you on the last Sunday in Advent is simply this: May you know that God is with you. Always.

Amen.