

Dazzling Darkness – Not What You Planned For?

18 December, 2016 Matthew 1: 18-25

On this fourth week of Advent, the days may be getting colder, but the light is growing. Growing here on our Advent wreath. Growing in our homes... in the shops and schools ... and at our places of work. In our psalm a voice cries out for the light of God's countenance to save us. And there's that little ember in your heart. You know the one. That tiny glow, holding out hope that maybe this year, the light of this newborn child to come, will shine through the darkness. Emmanuel. God with us.

In today's gospel story about that light coming into the world, our man Joseph finds himself in a bit of a bind. He is betrothed to Mary, and they are well into the first stage of their marriage when she comes around with some news.

She's going to have a child. And it is highly unlikely that the child is Joseph's biological child. But Joseph was betrothed to Mary, *might've* even loved her, and was reportedly a righteous man. What should he do? This was a serious betrayal. This is not what he had planned, or hoped for. Being married to a woman who was pregnant with a child – not his. So he decided he would simply divorce her. Quietly, so as not to expose her to public shame. Then he decided to sleep on it.

There's something about this season in the church when sleeping on any decision, or simply going to work or for a walk to find direction, risks what you might call ... holy interference. Angels appear in the heavens, dreams stir you in your sleep, celestial giants rise high in the nighttime sky. All portents of something new happening. Of a possible change of course. Or of seeing our worlds differently. Heavenly messengers saying, over and over, look! This might look like darkness. Might ache like darkness. Might even be a little terrifying, like darkness. But do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

So Joseph sleeps on it – and in that sleep he is visited by an angel who says, unsurprisingly, do not be afraid. The angel proceeds to assure Joseph that this is for the best by telling him it's a part of God's plan to save the world. Besides, it's not entirely outside of what you were planning to do anyway. You're already committed to Mary. You will raise a family. There's just this little... twist here at the beginning. But it's really important.

So Joseph agreed. He kept his promise to Mary, and kept the promises she made to him. He took her as his wife completely, and together they raised Jesus as a part of their family.

Joseph agreed for the same reason we might agree - I mean, we all want to be a part of God's plan for healing the world, don't we? We all want to be faithful, and loving, and make choices that work for everyone, don't we?

Over the past few years we have seen uprisings in the Middle East, on Wall Street, here in St. Louis, on the lands of First Nations, and even around our own Thanksgiving tables. Participating in these moments, as some of God's people, brings its own challenges. But before we jump in with our own fears and judgments and dismissals of people not living up to their end of the bargain - we need to stop. Remember Joseph. Take stock of our own righteousness. Remember the promises we have made.

Now I deeply love people who deeply disagree with each other about a number of things, large and small. But when the noise dies down they discover that they also agree on a number of things. However, getting that far in the conversations takes a lot of work. Consequently, I find myself drawn to solutions, directions, and light that illuminates the welfare of everyone, even when it exposes my own fears. My own prejudices. Being illuminated is hard - and risky.

But I think of those embers glowing steadily – still –in our hearts. Of each of our own individual lives with our personal and corporate legions of promises, made, kept, and broken. Albert Einstein said the truth isn't always a blinding light – sometimes it's a deep and dazzling darkness that illuminates and burns just as surely.

Dazzling darkness. Truth - there in what felt like a broken promise to Joseph. Truth - in the reluctance of Mary when the news first hit. Truth – when things don't always go as we planned. But God's light, or even dazzling darkness, is still breaking through. Breaking through on our walks, in our dreams, and from the night sky, revealing who we are, and saving us not only from our fears, but for transforming God's world. Be illuminated by the people around you, the glow of the Advent wreath, and when you approach this table, by the light of the world. Do not be afraid.

Let's pray ~ God, we join the voices across the ages asking for the light of your countenance, that we shall be saved. Amen