

## The Joy of a Child

Isaiah 7: 10-14

Matthew 1: 18-25

Are there any greater moments of joy than the birth of a child or a grandchild? So with the birth of the holy child Jesus, and with every holy child of God that comes into the world.

As we welcome the Christ Child into our lives with joy, we learn to welcome every child. And as we welcome them we learn to love them, care for them, protect them. *God bless them everyone.*

Joseph joins Mary on center stage today, and the way the two of them together brought Jesus into the world leads the way for us—with a little help from the prophet Isaiah seven centuries earlier

### I

Let's first go back those seven centuries, back into the messiness of history where God chooses to work.

King Ahaz was of the lineage of David, in Jesus' family tree, but he was a faithless and evil king. Two nations just to the north of Judea were moving toward taking over Judea and Jerusalem. Ahaz was shaking in his royal boots. And his heart and the peoples' hearts were trembling, the text says, "as trees in the forest shake before the wind" (Isaiah 7:2).

Out of his fear, Ahaz has decided to make a deal with the super-power Assyria: “If you protect me from my foes, I will give you my allegiance”. It was a bad and faithless deal. Fear can do that to us.

But God who works in geo-politics for the sake of the world sent Isaiah the prophet to him. He said to Ahaz: “Be firm and calm. Do not be afraid of them.” He called the two northern nations, “two smoking stumps of firebrands” (7:4). (Prophetic trash talk.)

Isaiah said to Ahaz: “Ask a sign of the Lord”. Ahaz replied, “I will not ask. I will not put the Lord to the test!” It sounded pious, but it was a smoke-screen. He had already made up his mind to work a deal with Assyria.

The Baptist humorist Grady Nutt used to tell the story of the Baptist minister who was offered a call to a church with a 50% raise in salary. He told the pulpit committee he’d pray about it. When he got home his wife asked, “How’d it go?” The preacher said, “Go upstairs and pack while I start praying down here.”

Isaiah’s response to Ahaz’ false piety were these confronting words, “Is it not enough that you treat your people as helpless that you also treat God as helpless?!”

Then Isaiah gave Ahaz a sign from God whether he wanted it or not:

Look, behold, a young woman is with child and about to give birth. Let her name him Immanuel, God-with-us, because God will be with us.

Scholars think that the young woman with child was well known to the king and city. Then Isaiah added for good measure:

By the time the child is old enough to choose the good and refuse evil, it will be a time of curds and honey for the nation.

“Happy days are here again!” or will soon be.

In other words, “Calm down Ahaz. Trust in God, not Assyria. Ahaz was not convinced. The sign is a baby?! Assyria, baby; baby, Assyria? Ahaz chose Assyria.

Fear can mess up our decision-making facility.

## II

Now it is 700 years later, and Joseph is given a sign, and the sign is again, a child in the womb, not his child, but Mary's his betrothed in marriage. In Luke's birth narrative the central figure is Mary. In Matthew's birth stories, Joseph takes center stage.

The miracle of the Incarnation took two to happen. “Where two or three are gathered in my name”, Jesus would later say, “I am in the midst of them.” In this case, the two were Joseph and Mary.

What had Mary told him when she told him she was pregnant? Did she speak of the angel and the Holy Spirit? How much could Joseph's male pride bear?

Betrothal was a solemn vow as binding as marriage. Each of the two lived in their parents' house for a year and had no sexual relations. To end a betrothal required a bill of divorce. Sex with another person constituted adultery, and adultery carried severe punishment.

Deuteronomy prescribed death by stoning, but there were other punishments available: public charges of adultery, disgrace, shaming, divorce, being banished to the edge of society. Who knows what would have happened to the child had Joseph not acted as he did.

Stoning or public shaming and abandonment were Joseph's two choices. But Joseph was a "just man", the text says; which meant righteousness and mercy were both at work. To paraphrase the psalmist, it is where steadfast love and faithfulness meet, where righteousness and mercy kiss. (Psalm 85:10).

So Joseph decided to divorce her quietly, no public charges and shame, and they each would go on with their lives as best they could.

God has something else in mind. God often does. And God intervened with a dream. An angel appeared to him in the dream and said:

Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.... the child she bears is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall name him Jesus.

Matthew parenthetically adds: “for he will save his people from their sins.” The name *Jesus* literally means “God saves.” Then Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah about the sign he gave to Ahaz:

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and his name will be called Emmanuel

Which Matthew explains means, God-with-us. That is the greatest miracle of Christmas: God-with-us! The heavens care, God knows and loves us.

Mark Twain said, “History does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme.” This is especially true of God’s salvation history, as now Isaiah’s sign and the sign given to Joseph *rhyme*.

Joseph now had another choice: to obey the dream with the angel’s call to him, or to dismiss it as just another dream. Whether to act out of faith or act out of *fear*. Joseph chose faith, and courage and love. He took Mary as his wife to have and to hold, to love and to cherish and took the child as his own to love, cherish and protect.

### III

So we too have a choice to make. Will we receive this child and welcome him with joy? If we do, it will help us receive all children and welcome them with joy, and care for them as all children need.

Frederick Buechner writing about the Annunciation when Mary said yes to the angel's call to bear the Christ, wrote of that moment; "*The world is with child.*" That's it. The whole world is with child and every birth a holy birth.

The United Nations promotes every so often a "Year of the Child". For Christians every year is "the Year of the Child". All children, the ones born in poverty, the neuro-divergent child, the typical—if there is such a thing—and non-typical child. Every child.

Such belief should inform our policies, local, state and national. The question should be over and over again: Will this be good for the children, and their children?

It is why we at Grace helped start PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, with Maggie at the helm. We care for our LGBTQ young people in a world often not kind to them.

It's why many of you are teachers and educators.

The birth of Jesus took two: Mary who had the courage to say yes, and Joseph who risked mercy and had the courage to love.

It takes two or three gathered in Jesus' name, or two or three hundred, or the almost a hundred here at Grace, to love, cherish and care for Jesus and all the children.

Sheldon Vanauken was a young professor trying to decide whether to believe and become a follower of Jesus. He wrestled over doctrines and some of the biblical stories—the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the Virgin Birth—and over what he had to believe in order to become a Christian.

In a poem on the verge of his conversion he wrote:

Did Jesus live? And did He really say  
The burning words that banish mortal fear?  
And are they true? Just this is central, here  
The Church must stand or fall. It's Christ we weigh.

The Question is, did God send us the Son  
Incarnate crying Love! Love is the way!

Then he, like Mary, said yes, like Joseph said yes. Like we who say yes, yes with joy, yes with all our hearts.

Amen