

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Psalm 80: 1-7; 17-19
Matthew 1: 1-25

Restorative Love
December 11, 2016
Mary R. Brownlow

Fear not the mysterious that labors for love.

In spite of us, uncontrollable mercy is with us.

– That is an excerpt from a poem by Lutheran Pastor Michael Coffey. We are so used to hearing, in the Advent Season, “Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us,’” that every once in a while we might need it re-phrased. “Uncontrollable Mercy” – now there’s a title that catches my attention.

Humans have a need for a framework and an explanation for all the things that come our way, especially those that are unpredictable and out of our control. We are all vulnerable. When illness strikes, we look for behavior and habits that may have been the cause. When families fall apart, we look for the combustible dynamics and personalities that are to blame. When lightning strikes a church and it burns down, the pastor might say, “God sent that lightning for a purpose, and we are going to rise up stronger because of it.” These explanations help us move on and act when we are paralyzed by the pain of the moment. We need a message that will help us to our feet. Angels are the messengers of God. They catch our attention and then, maybe, just maybe, help us with making sense of the world. Some would say they are those who speak the word that gives us the power to keep on living.

Angels show up a lot around Christmas time, in the Christmas story. In the Gospel of Matthew, they have a habit of showing up in dreams. Matthew gives us a series of five dreams around the birth of Christ: four dreamed by Joseph, and one by the wise men. Today we heard the first of them. But Matthew uses other signs too, and our reading today included the very beginning of the Gospel: the genealogy of Jesus. This list of generations is almost never read in church – who wants to listen to a long recital of so-and-so was the father of so-and-so? The “begats” people sometimes call them. But to Matthew, all this is a sign, a message. Joseph was a direct descendant of Abraham and of King David. He is an important link to the past and to the ancient kings of Israel. In listing all those names, just five times out of forty two, it breaks the rhythm and names the mother as well as the father. So if you are reading the whole thing out loud, it is the names of those five mothers that wake you up and grab your attention. The fifth one is Mary, the mother of Jesus, but the other four are all well known to those who really know their Hebrew Bible stories. They conceived babies under irregular circumstances, all four of them are associated with some sort of sexual scandal, and at least three of them are also gentile outsiders. But their babies were included in the royal line. So Matthew is preparing us for another “irregular” birth story, another scandal. Because an unmarried girl is pregnant, and her fiancé is not responsible for it. We need an angel or a prophet to help us make good sense of that.

Isn’t it odd that, in our tradition, when God’s spirit is moving to do something new among us, it almost always seems scandalous, immoral, frightening or offensive to most people? It’s going to be a stretch, but somehow we always manage to tame this down with time, to domesticize it, either through spiritualizing or literalizing our stories.

For years, the focus on this text has been the miracle of the virgin birth. Joseph was clearly not the father, but we are to understand that no sexual impropriety took place. The Holy Spirit caused this to happen. We may want to talk biology and obstetrics, but no one back in the first century would have

cared about that. It was a miracle, which caused Matthew to search the Hebrew Scriptures for a prophecy that would help all this make sense. He seems to have found one in the seventh chapter of Isaiah.

There, God tells the king of Judah, Ahaz, to ask for a sign, something spectacular and revealing, from anything in creation. Ahaz refuses to do this, and in frustration Isaiah speaks for God: "I'll give you a sign anyway." Nothing really unusual: a young woman is now pregnant with a son. Within a few years, once the child is able to reason a bit, the political crisis now facing the nation will have passed. If you remain faithful to God through all this, God will remain faithful to you and your ancestral house. The name of the child, 'God is with us' is a sign of this relationship. In this case, the message from God was a timeline. This is the time you have to hold on and be faithful. There was nothing here about a miraculous birth. A young woman was pregnant. Some people think that the young woman was one of Ahaz's wives, some think she was Isaiah's wife. But it is the symbolic window of time that is important, not the identity of the mother. The king was trying to manage a crisis on his own, with a short-term political strategy, panic-driven. God says, "No." Isaiah says, "God is with us." There is a longer timeline here than your immediate future, your immediate panic, your own needs. That is what you need to know, Ahaz, to make sense of this mess.

Matthew, with this story in mind, describes Joseph's dilemma, Joseph's crisis. He makes the point that Joseph is a righteous man, a law-abiding man. What does such a person do when his fiancé is pregnant and he hasn't slept with her? According to the Law, he brings evidence of her condition before the town, and the men of the town will stone her to death at the entrance of her father's house. But Joseph's righteousness is tempered with compassion. He doesn't want to stigmatize Mary, let alone execute her. So he decides to stretch the law a bit and keep the matter quiet. He escapes from this untenable relationship, and Mary escapes death. It is the kindest and safest way to deal with this problem. Joseph can go to bed with a clean conscience. It's not perfect, but the world now makes sense again.

Just when he has made his peace, then, he dreams. The messenger or angel calls him a Son of David, calling him back to that ancestral tree of scandal and promise. Don't be afraid to take a more drastic step, a more dangerous step. Marry this young woman, even though her pregnancy is mysterious. Graft this child onto that quirky and powerful ancestral tree, because God will save people through him. Remember Ahaz and Isaiah and the sign that was expressed through that young woman and her baby. God is not in outer space. God is with us and God will be with us. Joseph hears all this, and wakes up with a new decision. It is riskier: he is actually opening himself up to gossip and condemnation. God is calling him to make sense in a new way, to create an opportunity for a whole new **way** of making sense. This involved a complete mental turn-around – he had to believe that Mary's pregnancy was not a tragedy to be managed, but an opportunity to be grasped. "Fear not the mysterious that labors for love," as the poet says.

Because, according to Matthew, Jesus needed these two parents. Mary was the disruption, the one who broke the normal expected patterns of motherhood through the power of the Holy Spirit. She was receptive and courageous, and so lived into the prophecy: "God is with us." Joseph was the continuity, the one who could connect the dots between Abraham and David and the present and the future. Only he could do this. His law-abiding character, his compassion, his receptivity to dreams, his courage, - all of these things **also** said "God is with us."

And he keeps on dreaming, in ways that protect this new life. He dreams, “Flee to Egypt.” He dreams, “Go to the land of Israel.” He dreams, “Go to Galilee.” He seems always ready to move on, to re-think the needs of his family and the purposes of God.

You know, in Advent I always love to think about Mary, to preach about Mary. She is the one who takes on the risks of pregnancy and childbirth, the one who sings the Magnificat, the one who ponders things in her heart. Mary is a great role model. We often hear the choir sing ‘Ave Maria’ but we never sing ‘Ave Joseph.’ So this year, I ask myself, what can we learn from Joseph? Today’s reading is the annunciation - to Joseph.

We are told that Mary is a mother through the work of the Holy Spirit. But, wait a minute: Joseph is a father through the work of that same Spirit. In his sleeping and waking life, he is sensitive to the whisperings of the Spirit. In some mysterious way, it is able to give him certainty and a sense of direction. He finds that he is part of a larger story. There was a purpose in all those generations in his family tree: God was with them. There is a purpose in his decision to marry a pregnant woman. God is with him. There is a purpose in the future of this child: through him, God will be with all people. This will help the apparent mess of today make sense.

This goes against the logical grain, and against our usual constructs for fairness and morality. What are we supposed to think and what are we supposed to do if God is the creator of the scandal? Or if God doesn’t act within the rules and the boundaries? Or if God doesn’t seem to respect the way things are supposed to be? Maybe even our own seasons of wounded pride or entitlement have God’s fingerprints all over them: the fingerprints of uncontrollable mercy. Maybe the challenges of our time, the call to protect the environment, care for the poor, forgive often, reject racism, fight for the powerless, share earthly and spiritual resources, embrace diversity, love God and enjoy this life – all of those admonitions on the banner over our front door – are the wild dreams of that uncontrollable mercy, restoring us to an unaccustomed love.

Like Joseph, we may wish to be law-abiding and just. We recognize the utility of all the rules and customs that keep society together. But we need more. First of all we need Joseph’s compassion to temper our righteousness. Even if we are hurt and angry, it may be that shame and disgrace are not the best tools for those who wish to make things right. There may be a quiet word or a quiet method that brings peace and closure to a troubled situation. But it turns out we need **even** more. We need an angel speaking in our waking or sleeping ears, saying, “Do not be afraid.” You may be called out of the quiet option into a riskier type of compassion. Even though your decision has been made, and you ready to go with it, wait: something new is breaking into the world. You have the opportunity to bring life out of today’s dead end. You have been called by wild, uncontrollable mercy and restorative love.

The work of the people who gather together to live as a church is this kind of work: pulling meaning out of every facet of life: our ancestors (or our family of origin), our present crisis (or illness or conflict or political mess), our dreams (or our insights and hopes) and our best inner qualities. Rather than compartmentalizing into should and shouldn’t, yours and mine, secular and churchy, we take the long view, the God’s eye view. Because that is our way of making sense of our crazy world: confronting our fears with love, confronting despair with hope, cooperating with God in this great process of creation. At Christmas time, this is what makes sense: God is not in outer space. God enters into our lives as a mysterious labor for love and an uncontrollable mercy. God was with us in Bethlehem and God is with us now, in all of our uncertainty and confusion, today. Amen.