

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

December 18, 2022

Hope Blooms in Dreams

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 27, 2022

When do we get to hold the baby? Isn't that what Advent is about? Preparing ourselves to look in the manger and touch our savior.

Since the beginning of Advent, we've thought about the ways hope blooms in this bleak season.

Hope blooms in our impromptu choice to say "yes, and," to another person, in a time of need. Hope blooms in the wilderness when we shed all our baggage and discover what it's like to be loved and to love. Hope blooms when doubt presses upon us so that we finally open our eyes to see our savior.

The gospel lesson for today prompts us to consider if we will consent to do what God needs us to do, in our unique capacity, to nurture the future. Hope blooms when our dreams compel us to hold a baby, today, just as surely as if we stood in the manger.

Matthew's gospel opens with a long line of Joseph's ancestors, Jesus' father.

Embedded within this genealogy of the pillars of faith are the misfits, immigrants, and women of ill repute, without whom, the Hebrew people would have perished. Their names convey the stories of those who embraced the dream to become what God desires.

As surely as Joseph's DNA carried Abraham's faith and Moses' courage, he also inherited the capacity to believe in the dream that one man can participate in some unique way to be an agent in God's salvation

Scripture tells us very little of Joseph, and all we need to know for his model of faithfulness to guide us today.

Today's gospel story tells us how he responds to the annunciation of Jesus' birth.

Dear God, we know you speak to us in quiet, ordinary, and sometimes shocking ways. In this story we think we know so well, help us to set aside our preconceived notions, our skepticism, so we imagine Joseph's dilemma, and sense his fear. Help us hear this story so we learn to trust you when you speak to us today. Amen.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but

had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Without any speaking role, we are tempted to sideline Joseph as a minor character in the history of salvation. Yet the Gospel of Matthew begins with Joseph's pivotal decision.

As the story goes, this God-fearing carpenter wakes up one morning to learn his plans shattered. His fiancé carries a child that could not be his and suddenly, their future seems bleak.

Always described as a righteous man, Joseph stands in a faith tradition that pursues life. That's what "righteous" means, doing the right thing to love God and neighbor. If he calls attention to Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might forever be scorned, and her child called the shameful names we might hear whispered in parking lots and lunchroom cafeterias behind someone's back.

Joseph made up his mind to quietly dismiss her, sparing her public ridicule.

Contrary to the hypothesis often preached that he planned to act quietly to keep Mary from being executed, distinguished New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt University, Amy-Jill Levine cautions us to know that idea is wrong. Even if Joseph publicly broke off the engagement, the village would not have stoned Mary to death.

The Rabbinic tradition always seeks to protect the welfare of children. Mary's family and the village would have found a way to care for her and her child, even if Joseph left.¹

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 121-122.

In today's climate of ever increasing antisemitism, we need to stop these negative ideas of Judaism and other notions that promote the Christmas story as the only means of grace entering the world. Long before the time of Jesus, our Jewish faith story teaches us that God's mercy guides God's judgement.

That's a crucial point to confront antisemitism and understand the theology that shaped Joseph's character. As a man devoted to righteousness, Joseph sought to preserve life. Therein lies his quandary as a potential father. If he takes Mary as his wife, this child will be his heir, inheriting the privilege accorded to a first-born son, instead of his biological child.

Although not in the text, we can imagine his anguish at wondering how Mary conceived. Did she love someone else? Why would this happen to a righteous man?

If we sidestep these deeply human emotions erupting within him, we sanitize Joseph's consent and assume that accepting God's plan comes easily and without cost.

In bewildering moments of fear, God intervenes. Anytime scripture speaks of a dream, it confirms that those who fear the consequences of their decisions in the eyes of God, become open to God's guidance. No wonder the first message Joseph hears is "do not be afraid." It can be costly to love and protect a child that is not your own."

Then the most subtle phrase, we tend to gloss over it when we get caught up in the people, the improbable, whole purpose of Jesus' birth to "save his people from their sin."

With this, any personal vision of Joseph's first-born pales in comparison to the promise that if he picks up the infant Jesus, he will participate in God's plan for our salvation.

In the context of the first century, to be saved from our sin concerns changing broad societal failures, not just an individual list of errors. The salvation God promises through this child will confront how a society behaves in ways that ignore God's justice. This child will challenge the ways a community denies mercy to the weak and vulnerable.²

First, God needs Joseph's consent.

Hasn't that been true throughout our faith history and even today?

Usually, any step towards healing our world from sin, of societal injustice or hatred, or bigotry, or worshiping other gods, or healing any of the ways we seem stuck in patterns that harm others, begins in a deeply personal encounter with another flesh and blood human.

Usually, any step towards our collective salvation begins by seeing the vulnerability of someone, and feeling as if, being handed a child to hold.

Joseph's story teaches us the world changes one child at a time.

A New Englander by the name of Bill Cario begins his story, "I am telling you what everybody else did. I did nothing alone, and I still don't." Many of the people whom Cario credits with heroism on the day of the shooting at Sandy Hook say that he personifies a response that began with duty and ended with love.

^{2 2} Jane Patterson, "Preaching Christmas 2022," Backstory Preaching, December 8, 2022, lecture notes.

Bill Cario was the first of law enforcement to arrive at this elementary school, entering the building while the killer was still active.

Ten years after the violent rampage that left twenty first-grade students and six educators dead, he still refuses to allow his photo to be shared. He reluctantly speaks of what transpired. This week, the first article was published about his role, even though he tended the victims' families and still works to protect kids in school.

Reporters found in the written record, Cario described, "(A)s I stared in disbelief, I recognized the face of a little boy." To this day, he claims it is the only specific image he recalls in the first room.

The little boy, named Ben Wheeler, was still breathing. He describes carrying Ben in his arms to a squad car near the school entrance, which transported them to a waiting ambulance. Cario was the last man to hold Ben as he died.

In keeping with his quiet reverence for the victims and their families, he never spoke of his experience until now. And does so only because Ben Wheeler's father described the comfort he felt in Cario's presence, knowing this man tended his son.³

It's been ten years since that little boy was laid to rest. Had a bullet, maybe several, not pierced his body, he'd probably be driving a car, driving his parents crazy, contemplating college, and a career.

³ Elizabeth Williamson, "10 Years Later, a State Trooper Who Responded to Sandy Hook Looks Back," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/14/us/politics/sandy-hook-anniversary.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20221215&instance_id=80229&nl=the-morning®i_id=47214561&segment_id=119595&te=1&user_id=56f4634ce93a338814548fb0f80ecfa6

I did not know Benjamin, and only vaguely recall his father, but I knew and loved his grandfather, Bud Wheeler, who married into my family. In grieving the Sandy Hook anniversary this week, the story of Bill Cario and his care for Ben Wheeler took my breath away with a flood of memories of Bud.

He stood as a pillar of strength and calm. Just when our weirdness seemed to leak out one Thanksgiving, I could look at him. His smile kind of let me know that we were just fine.

Retirement opened his playground. Bud thrived on adventure. Sailing. Hiking.

About a year after Sandy Hook, just as surely as a bullet pierced his grandson's body, grief pierced his heart. The death certificate reads "heart attack." We know Bud died of a broken heart. He never got to hold his grandson again.

Sandy Hook's tragedy forever scars our nation. The statistics of the number of children who died that day and since in gun violence can numb me. Gun violence is now the number one cause of death for children. Benjamin's death makes it personal for me because of Bud.

Isn't it amazing and so often true that one man, in a distant state or long ago, impacts our lives? I remember Bud. You can read about Bill Cario. We all share the story of Joseph.

Those men loved deeply the children they held, knowing they were entrusted to protect fragile life.

What makes compels you to parent a child beyond your immediate family? With all the chaos in the world, do you even want to?

No wonder the first words Joseph hears in his dream are “do not be afraid.” If we hope that God will save us, then we must be willing to set aside our fear of what God might call us to do.

Maybe risk the ridicule of saying “no more to gun violence” when the mere mention of “gun” puts others on guard. Or, to work to end climate change for the next generation in an economy focused on the price at the pump. Or, advocate to educate every child. Or, find a way so children do not go to bed hungry, either in your city or on some distant shore.

God calls each of us in some personal and immediate way to be a part of the world’s salvation, revealed in Jesus, and first nurtured by Joseph.

God asks us to take a personal stake in the lives of others, to do something alarmingly different than we thought we could. Hope blooms when we decided to hold the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible. Aware of this risk, and given this promise, are you prepared for Christmas when God hands you God’s son?



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