

“THE THINGS OF CHRISTMAS: I – CHRISTMAS STRESS!”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 1:26-35

Anybody here a list maker? I am. I am a list maker extraordinaire! I make lists all the time for everything. I make a list every night for everything I need to accomplish at work the next day. I make lists for the grocery store, lists for birthdays and special occasions coming up, and of course, I have a plethora of lists for Christmas. How about you?

I have a 98 year old aunt, who never writes lists – and I mean never! She actually told my mother once never to write lists because it makes your mind lazy – keep your brain working by keeping all those lists in your head! Well, she’s better than I am, or at least her brain is, because I rely on lists, mostly to cut down on my stress.

Sometimes stress can get the better of me, so I find when I write things down, it gives me a sense of control, and sometimes lets me see that it’s not as bad as I thought. But – sometimes when I make my lists, especially at this time of year – it increases my stress.

You know what I mean, right? You’re probably feeling it already, even though it’s just the beginning of December, and we have three weeks – exactly – until Christmas Day. Yikes – three weeks!

Three weeks in which to get everything done – the decorating, the shopping, the wrapping, the baking, the cleaning, the Christmas cards, the parties, the concerts, well, I could go on and on. There’s too much to do, and not enough time to do it – and if that’s not a recipe for stress, I don’t know what is.

So, we’re all dealing with that right now. And while I don’t want to minimize that kind of stress, because it can take a toll on us, I want to talk about another kind of stress this morning, a deeper level of stress, if you will.

It’s the kind of stress that the central character in the Gospel lesson was experiencing. His name was Joseph. He was a good man, a kind man, from all we know about him. He was a hardworking man – a carpenter by trade. Life was good for him – he had found a match for himself in a young woman named Mary. Surely

he and Mary's parents had arranged everything, and they were well on their way to a wedding.

In that day and age, the first step to marriage was betrothal – a kind of engagement, if you will – but it was a very legal arrangement – they might as well have been married. So Mary and Joseph were betrothed to be married, and all was right with the world. Plans were being made for their future – and it all looked pretty wonderful.

And then, the bottom fell out of Joseph's world. Mary became pregnant, and because they had not been together, it was not his child. I'm sure his heart broke when he heard the news, but what caused his stress level to soar were the implications of it. What was he to do? If he publicly broke off their engagement and let it be known that Mary had become pregnant before marriage, and not by him, she could have been stoned in the streets (for that was the law at that time). At the very least, she would have been shunned by society, and as a result, left a poor, lonely, probably poverty-stricken woman.

Joseph didn't want any of that, for while his heart was broken, still he cared for this woman who would have been his wife. So, he decided to just split from her quietly, and try to help her get on with her life. And he would move on himself.

Now that's stress, friends, that's real, serious stress. While all of us know the kind of stress I talked about earlier, I think there are probably some here today that, unfortunately, know all too well real, serious stress too. You know what he's going through. You understand about wrestling in your sleep, waking up as tired as you were when you went to bed because your mind wouldn't shut off.

Some of you know the kind of betrayal Joseph felt, because you've been betrayed too, and it's changed your life. Some of you know the stress of strained family relationships, how walls get bigger and bigger, and silence gets louder and louder. Some of you feel the stress of financial issues, and the sadness of knowing you can't provide the kind of Christmas you want to provide for those you love. Some of you have stress because of addiction issues – yours or someone in your family, and some are stressed because of serious health issues – health issues that have changed your life.

Put those types of serious stress issues on top of the ordinary stress of the Christmas season – and you have a recipe for disaster . . . unless, we take a page out of dear Joseph's book.

As I said, Joseph had pretty much decided to dismiss Mary quietly, and move on with his life, until one night, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and let him in on the whole truth – that the child conceived in Mary was of the Holy Spirit, that this was God’s will, and that God wanted him (Joseph) to be the Messiah’s earthly father.

Thanks be to God, Joseph listened, and the story, which could have ended badly, instead ended by fulfilling God’s will for all of humanity. And it ended that way, because Joseph trusted God. Period. He trusted God’s word through the angel that this was God’s will, and that it was going to be okay – no, more than okay, it was going to change the world.

You know, Joseph could have awakened that morning and said to himself, “Oh, that was only a dream,” and gone on with his plan, but instead he trusted God and followed God’s call on his life to do this very special thing with this very special baby.

Writer Janet Hunt has some wonderful thoughts on what Joseph did. She writes, “It was the decision of a lifetime for Joseph. It was one he could never have expected to make and yet, it is also a dilemma which will parallel one we will probably all face at one time or another as we are called to sort out how we are called to do the right thing in a situation that at first seems all wrong. And when you do that, when you step up and do what is right and good in the face of earthly ‘wisdom’ or advice which would urge you otherwise, when you act with forgiveness and hope and trust, well then, the world changes. It surely did with Joseph and Mary and Jesus. And it does every other time, too.” (Online, *Dancing with the Word*, “Just What a Dad Does,” Janet Hunt, 12/15/13)

She’s right, when we listen to God’s call, God’s direction, God’s will, when we trust in what he’s telling us, trust what we feel in our gut and know in our heart, all will be well, and the world changes a little bit.

So, my friends, if stress is getting the better of you right now, whether it’s seasonal stress, or serious, deep-down stress, I invite you to hear what Joseph heard from the angel of the Lord, “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. God is with you. Listen to him, for he will guide your steps. Follow where he leads, and all will be well.”

As you come forward today, after you have received communion, I invite you to go to the chancel rail for prayer, and lay down your stress before God. Ask him to guide you through it, to show you the way, and trust that he will. As he did with Joseph, as he did with Mary, so will he with you and me. Thanks be to God!

Amen.