

“ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS: PEACE”

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Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 1:18-25

She was afraid. Young, sweet, teenage Mary, was afraid. In the midst of an otherwise ordinary day, an angel of the Lord had come to her and what he said to her changed her life forever – that God had chosen her to bear His Son into the world. Of course, that news overwhelmed her, but it also threw everything else into her life helter-skelter. She was engaged, betrothed to a carpenter by the name of Joseph. Her parents had arranged that, and everyone was so happy for what the future would hold for them both. Plans were being made for the wedding. Everything was going so well.

And now, this. None of us can imagine what went through Mary’s mind, but one thing for sure, as the scripture says, “She was perplexed.” I think that’s putting it mildly. She had to be scared to death.

How would she explain her pregnancy to those around her? Her parents. Joseph. Her friends. The townspeople. Everyone would think the worst of her. There would be all kinds of rumors and finger-pointing, and laughing.

And maybe, worst of all, Joseph would turn away. I mean, why wouldn’t he? Who could blame him? She, single and pregnant, and not by him. Everything she hoped and dreamed for, all the years she looked forward to spending with him, could possibly never happen.

Mary was so afraid.

So was Joseph. Scripture doesn’t say how he found out that Mary was pregnant, but surely that news stopped his world. What would he do?

Well, there was lots he could do. He could just break the engagement, and walk away – the law said that he could and everybody would understand why he would.

He could, actually, have joined in the jeering and making sport of Mary with the rest of the crowd – again, people would understand after it appeared he had been betrayed by his fiancée.

And he could have stood by and watched as the law took over – and the law of that day said that a woman caught in adultery – which, is of course, what all would

assume when Mary was seen pregnant – a woman caught in adultery could be stoned to death.

Oh, so much was weighing heavy on Joseph's mind. He was afraid, so afraid.

Living in fear. I have a feeling that a lot of people in this room know what it means to live in fear. Some may actually have found themselves in Mary and Joseph's situation – unplanned pregnancies, adultery.

But fear comes in so many different guises! We're afraid because we're waiting for test results and news from the doctor. We're afraid because we're not sure our marriage is going to survive. We're afraid because there are too many bills and not enough money to pay them. We're afraid because we hear there will be layoffs at work, and there might not be a job next week. We're afraid because our child has turned away and gone in a bad direction. We're afraid because we might not pass in school. We're afraid because – well, you fill in the blank.

And certainly, our world today does nothing to allay our fears. One person writing about that said this: "If you listen to the news very often, you are just about ready to give up on life. One story after another of how bad it is fills our family rooms. (He continues) I felt good the other night before watching the evening news, but when it was over, all I could think of was that 'I need a little Christmas right now.' Don't show me anything else that is bad." (On-line, "Have I Got Good News for You!", Rev. Dr. William L. Self, 12/8/05)

I'll bet I can get a few Amens! to that, huh? There's a lot of scary stuff going on right now, and not a few of us are afraid. Do you know that I read this week a report from Amazon that said that "the most highlighted Bible passage on their Kindle e-reader is Philippians 4:6-7, which begins with, 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.'"

That's the most highlighted passage in all of the Bible. "Do not be anxious . . . " That tells you something, doesn't it? All of us struggle with fear, just like Mary and Joseph.

But the Good News of the Gospel is that there is an answer to our fear, and His name is Jesus. Jesus, God's gift to us, God's sign that He is with us, in the flesh, in our midst, walking where we walk, facing what we face. And that, for us, means peace – peace because we're never alone, He is always with us, and knowing that we can face whatever life brings our way.

So, because of God's grace and peace, because of Jesus, Mary could face Joseph, her parents, the townspeople, everyone.

And Joseph could face the scrutiny and laughter, even the struggles they would still face, because of God's grace and peace, because of Jesus.

And you and I can face the fears in our lives and the fear in our world because of God's grace and peace, because of Jesus – knowing that we are never alone, and that all will yet be well.

Sadly, struggles will still come, and life will still continue to be filled with times of uncertainty, but we have no need to ultimately fear – because God is always with us through His Son and our Savior Jesus.

So I close with a story from World War II which will show you just how true that is. You may know that British prisoners were held in prisoner of war camps in northern Burma – their story was actually told in the movie “The Bridge Over the River Kwai.” As you can imagine, it was a horrible experience for them all, but in the midst of that terrible time, realizing that they were going to be imprisoned for a long while, the prisoners began to have Bible studies and prayer together.

One of the prisoners said that early on “the thrust of our praying was to be delivered from this prison camp and that was it. Our praying was shallow and superficial, and we were railing against God for letting us be here. But something happened to us and that kind of railing against God disappeared. And we began to move toward a more mature faith. We began to pray about how we could relate to one another in those bad situations. No longer was it ‘Why God?’ but it was ‘How should we act, God?’”

On Christmas in 1944, their captors gave the prisoners a break, and did not make them take work detail that day and they were even given a bit more food. As they moved around the camp that Christmas day they sensed that things were different. And then, in one of the huts one soldier began to sing a Christmas carol. The sound echoed throughout the camp, and others began to sing, wandering over in the direction of the original singer's hut. Finally, they all gathered in the parade field and sat in a big circle and sang carols together, and the one who told this story said, “God touched us that day.” He said it was the most sacred event he had ever been involved with. No preaching, nothing of the usual church paraphernalia (as he put it), just men united by their common misery, singing of God being with them and God's sovereignty. “We were touched by God.” (Ibid)

In the midst of that place of great, great fear, where every day those men didn't know if that day would be their last, they were touched by God – by the peace of God.

So, my friends, do not be afraid. In Jesus, God is with us. Jesus – the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem; Jesus – our Lord and Savior; Jesus – the prince of peace.

So whatever your fear today, when you come to the rail for communion, lay it before God and let His peace flow over you that you may have the courage to go forth from this place unafraid – knowing that He goes with you, now and forever.

Amen.