

“CHRISTMAS LIST: II – PEACE”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

The other night, Mom and I drove up to Chalfont, Pennsylvania to celebrate my brother Adam’s birthday with him and his family. Mom drove on the way up and I drove on the way back. I asked Mom to drive up there because I was really tired – for some reason, I had awakened – wide awake – at four o’clock Tuesday morning – and couldn’t go back to sleep. So she drove.

Later on, we were sitting at Adam and Linda’s kitchen table talking and Adam yawned, and off-handedly commented that he was tired because he had awakened about four a.m. and couldn’t go back to sleep. And then, unbelievably, Mom said that earlier she had been talking to our brother Jeff out in the State of Washington, and he too had been unable to sleep during the night – he too woke up that morning at 4 a.m.!

Wow! I don’t know what was in the air that night, but I do know that the three of us aren’t alone. So many people have trouble sleeping these days. I’m told it happens more and more the older you get – not something I want to hear – but I know that I hear all the time about people having trouble sleeping.

Surely that was the case with the main character in this morning’s Gospel lesson – Joseph, the husband of Mary, the earthly father of Jesus. Unlike those of us who were probably restless and couldn’t sleep because lists of things we have to do, and places we have to go, and gifts we have to buy, and so on are flying through our minds – Joseph had a deeply profound reason for his night-time wrestling. His betrothed – his fiancée Mary – the woman he was so delighted to look forward to spending his life with – had told him shocking, no heartbreaking, news – that she was pregnant. And he knew that it wasn’t his child. And he was devastated. And if you’ve ever been devastated by something, you know that it’s in the middle of the night that it really, really gets to you.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote a sermon entitled “Voices in the Night,” and in it she talked about leading a Bible study where the subject of waking up in the middle of the night came up. Almost everyone in the circle shared their experience of having that happen to them at one time or another. Here’s what she wrote:

“It turned out that a hefty majority of those present woke up at four in the morning – or three, or two-thirty – and worried. They all had different solutions for their common problem, which they shared . . . one walked her dog; one got up and cooked; one pinched the dead leaves off her houseplants; several read; and several more, including me (Taylor writes), made lists. What we all had in common was an uneasiness, if not a downright fear of the night, of the literal power of darkness to make benign things seem bad and bad things seem much, much worse. We could not agree what it was all about, but we did agree

we all heard certain voices in the night and they very rarely had anything good to say to us." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, "Voices in the Night," p. 18-19).

I have no doubt that poor old Joseph was hearing voices on that fateful night, and the voices were stirring up all sorts of frightening thoughts. What would happen when people found out Mary was pregnant? They would either a) think that she and Joseph had had marital relations before they were married, which would have been terrible for both of them; or b) think that she had betrayed him and lain with another man. Either way, it was terrible for both of them.

What should he do? What would he do? A woman who was unfaithful would be, at the very least, publicly humiliated and shamed, and at worst, put to death. Joseph knew all that, and surely those things were what rolled around in his head as he rolled around on his bed that night.

Unlike Mary, Joseph knew he himself had options. He could break the engagement, which was like a divorce in that day. That was his right, and he knew that most everybody would understand that – he was betrayed, he should divorce her.

And, quite frankly, he could have joined in the public humiliation and carried out a very public divorce – loudly letting the world know that he had been done wrong – and he was getting out while the getting was good. And yes, people would have understood that as well.

All of those things must have been stirring in his heart and soul that fateful night – keeping him from getting the rest he needed. What was he going to do? What should he do? How would he get through it?

The scripture actually says that he had made up his mind – he was going to dismiss her quietly – call it quits, and go on with life – not humiliate her, just put it behind the both of them, and get on with life. That's what he was going to do – until . . .

His personal wrestling match was interrupted by a dream, and in that dream an angel of the Lord appeared to him, saying those most wonderful and sought after words: "Do not be afraid." Then the angel went on to tell him that the baby in Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit, it would be a son, and he told him to name that son Jesus, for He would save the people from their sins.

That whisper from God through the voice of the angel was all Joseph needed to hear. He seemed to know beyond a shadow of doubt then what he needed to do, and I have a feeling, for the next few hours, he found that blissful sleep that had been so elusive just a few moments before.

Why? Well, I think that whisper from God, that visit from the angel, did at least two things for Joseph. First of all, I think it made clear to him how much Mary needed him. What a burden she was bearing, even though, yes, it was a heaven-sent, blessed burden. Still, what a burden she was bearing, and she needed someone to support her, help her, and even carry her on that journey. Joseph was that someone.

She would, indeed, face those stares from suspicious people, hear those gossip-mongers do their worst, watch their best-laid plans for a lovely wedding go asunder – and

she would need someone to dry her tears, help her ignore those voices, and make new plans for the future – and that someone was Joseph.

And the second thing that whisper from God, that visit from the angel did for Joseph was allow him to see that that baby, that Christ-child, would need him as well. Preacher Alyce McKenzie writes about this so beautifully – listen to her words: The baby “will need a father to be accepted by others as he grows to manhood. He will need, not just any father, but a father like you, capable of nurturing him, and giving him a name – ‘Immanuel – God with us.’ He will need a father like you to teach him to take risks like the one you are about to take, for he will be tempted not to take them. He will need a father like you to teach him to withstand the disapproval of others, as you will soon have to withstand it. He will need a father like you to teach him what to do in situations like this one, when all hope seems lost and only pain remains; to model how to believe the unbelievable good news and to walk ahead in faith. If you do not walk the hard road to Bethlehem, who will teach him how to walk the cruel hill to Calvary?” (On-line, Alyce McKenzie, “The Fear of Betrayal”)

Who, indeed? On that night, the whispers of God in the voice of an angel caused Joseph to realize how much Mary needed him and how much Jesus would need him – so he said “Yes.”

And when he did, he knew peace. He heeded the words of the angel to not be afraid, and he was at peace. No matter what lay ahead, Joseph knew that he wouldn’t be alone – that the God who brought this child in Mary’s womb into being, and the God who sent an angel to visit him in his sleep, was the very same God who would be with him every step of this treacherous journey ahead – and it would be okay. He was at peace.

We know, looking back on it now, that it was indeed a treacherous journey. From the very beginning when Joseph and Mary walked back into the world and faced the public, to the journey through her pregnancy, through the physical journey to Bethlehem and the struggle to find a place for her to give birth, to the actual birth, and then the rush to get out of town because Jesus’ life was in danger, and then to all of the things that faced him along his life’s journey, to his death on the cross – it was a treacherous journey – yet in the midst of it all, there was peace. For God was in the midst of it all.

Thinking about all of that turmoil, brought to my mind something I had read a long time ago about a portrait of peace. It seems that there was once a contest in which artists were asked to paint a portrait that showed perfect peace. Many artists lined up to take part, and when the contest ended, they brought their paintings to be judged. A crowd gathered to watch the judging. One painting after another was displayed, showing quiet, pastoral scenes – they were lovely. Then came a really beautiful one – it was a portrait of a mirror-smooth lake, beautiful trees lining its banks, a lovely evening sky, and in a meadow along the shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. A buzz ran through the crowd – hmm, this might be the one!

Then, the final portrait was uncovered, and the crowd gasped in surprise. It was a painting of a thunderous waterfall flowing over a rocky precipice, water spraying everywhere. Dark storm clouds threatened overhead, and you could almost feel the rain falling and the thunder booming. In the midst of the scene, a spindly little tree was clinging to the rocks at the edge of the falls, and one of its branches reached out in front of the torrential water as if trying to touch it. And there, in the elbow of that branch, a little bird had built a nest. Content and undisturbed, she sat there, nesting on her eggs. Her

eyes were closed, her wings were covering her precious babies-to-be – she was the portrait of perfect peace. (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

I don't know about you, but that's Joseph to me. Eyes closed, his arms ready to cover his precious wife, and that precious, precious child – and with God in the midst of it – he is the portrait of perfect peace – ready to face the tumult that was coming their way.

My friends, I don't know what the tumult is in your life these days. It might just be that you're crazy busy trying to get everything ready for Christmas, but it could be that you're crazy worried about someone you love. It might be that you're afraid because you don't have enough money to pay your bills, or you don't know what the future brings because you've gotten bad news from the doctor. It might be that you're holding on for dear life to a fragile relationship, or that you're afraid for one of your children. It might be that you're depressed, or you're just plain afraid.

Whatever it is that keeps you awake at it, know this – that the God who whispered to Joseph is there for you as well, to make a way where you can't see it, and to walk with you on that way, all the way. If you allow him to, He will give you perfect peace, and take away crippling fear. I invite you, I invite all of us, to take a lesson from Joseph this day, and trust that God will work things out.

So, let me close with a story, as I often do. It's from my old favorite, Tony Campolo. When Tony was a young boy growing up poor in the city of Philadelphia, he tried whenever he could to help his family pay their bills. Well, he was in high school, and he said the family was really, really struggling at the time, so he had a number of part-time jobs.

One day, he discovered that the bakery a few blocks away from his house would, at the end of the day, sell the rest of their inventory for about a tenth of the regular price. He quickly figured out that there were some diners around them that would buy the bread at triple the price he paid for it. So, at 9:00 at night, he would ride his bike down to the bakery, load up with the baked goods, and take off for those diners. He did really well at it, and helped his family tremendously with the money he made.

Well, one night, in the middle of winter, he was making his way home after selling the last loaf of bread. It was about 11:00. Freezing drizzle was pouring down on him, soaking his clothes clear through, and he was shaking he was so cold – deep down to his bones. He says he doesn't remember a night being so dark and dreary, and he was dead tired.

All of a sudden, one of the tires on his bicycle blew. It was one of those old Schwinn bikes with balloon tires, and he said it blew with a bang! Listen to what he said about that moment: "It's hard to describe what I thought and felt at that moment. I got off my bike, sat down on the curb, put my head in my hands, and started to cry. I was tired and I was beaten. I had tried so hard to be a good boy and earn some money for my family, and then this had to happen. I remember moaning, 'God, everybody thinks You're good, and maybe You are to other people, but it seems You're just mean to me. How could You let this happen? Why can't you help me? You know what? I think after today, I'm just not going to believe in You anymore?'"

Tony says that he doesn't remember how long he sat there, but finally he got up, picked up his bike and began making the long, freezing, wet walk home. He hadn't gone very far when he came upon a gas station, and spied the air pump. If he had been in his

right mind, and not freezing to death, and totally despondent, he would have ignored it – knowing that the pumps were turned off at night, and the tire needed a new inner tube – that it couldn't be inflated. But he was in a frozen stupor, and so he went over, took the valve off of the tire, and started pumping. Amazingly, air came out of the pump, and the tire inflated! He couldn't believe it.

But it did – and as soon as he finished putting air in and put the valve back on – he jumped on that bike and high-tailed it home as fast as he could get there. It was about 11:30 by then, and he jumped off the bike, ran up the front steps, turned the key in the door and all of a sudden, from behind him, he heard a big old “whoosh!” and he turned around and watched all the air leave that tire. Within seconds, it was completely flat again.

In the morning, he went out and looked at it, and saw that there was about a three-inch tear in that tube, and at that moment, he knew that something miraculous had happened. (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 34)

Oh, my friends, sometimes life is like that. Something happens and life blows apart for us, and we struggle to move on. Sometimes, yes, we even lash out at God and ask him “why?” Sometimes moving forward seems impossible.

But it's then that God comes in, and makes a way. It's then that God whispers to us and says, “Do not be afraid. I am with you. It will be okay.”

He said it to Joseph on a night long ago. And if you listen, He will say it to you – and like Joseph, you will know peace – perfect peace. May it be so.

Amen.