
I Did Not Sign Up for This

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Advent 4 – Year A

All week, I have been wondering what it would be like to use Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth for a Christmas pageant. Our children will be rehearsing for the pageant later today, getting ready for Christmas Eve... some of you were here on Thursday for the Cathedral Preschool’s pageant... both use Luke’s version of Jesus’ birth. You know, the one Linus quotes in Charlie Brown’s Christmas. The angel visits Mary, tells her not to be afraid, that she’ll conceive a son with the help of the Holy Spirit, and that the child will be the Messiah, Mary consents saying, “Let it be,” and then goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth—also with child. As the time for Jesus’ birth draws near, Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem for a census, give birth to a son among the animals, and are visited by shepherds before fleeing to Egypt as refugees.

But this is not that story. This is the story of Joseph.

It’s also the story of scandal, of awkward conversations, of whispers and shame, of dreams, of courage, and even defiance. It’s a story of risk, faith, and obedience. And it’s in this story that God chooses to be *with us*.

It’s rare that a preacher gets to talk about Joseph. His version of the Christmas story only comes up on a Sunday every three years. But we do remember Joseph in the daily lectionary once a year, on the 19th of March. I happened to find myself preaching on March 19 of this year, and I shared with my friends at Canterbury Court that day that I believed Joseph was the patron saint of “I did not sign up for this.”

I imagine all of us have had moments in our lives where we’ve had the same thought—I did not sign up for this. This is not at all what I was expecting. Where do I go from here? Perhaps a few months into taking a new job, or a few weeks into a new relationship, perhaps after learning about a life-altering illness, or learning you have to move across the country for your wife’s job. We all have moments that take us by unpleasant surprise, and every pathway forward is marked with difficulty. There is no easy out. Joseph’s story describes such a time. Here he is, a righteous man who presumably plays by the rules. He comes from a good family—the house of David—which like all good families has its issues, but still... It is Joseph who ensures Jesus is from the line of David by accepting and claiming Jesus as his own son.

One of the non-canonical books of our tradition, the Gospel of James, describes in great detail the struggle Joseph must have felt. In the story, Joseph comes back from a building project out of town to find Mary 6 months pregnant. He throws himself down on the ground in anguish, crying out to God. Mary too, cries, defending her innocence. Joseph retreats, afraid, wrestling with the fact that hiding Mary’s “sin” would be against the law, but exposing it could lead to her death. It is in this place we find Joseph today, and in this place that the angel of the Lord comes to Joseph, saying, “Be not afraid.”

Be not afraid? You might think with a preface like this, the angel would have some neat and tidy solution for Joseph’s—and Mary’s—predicament. But it is not neat, and it is not tidy. It is a hard ask. Take Mary as your wife. Name the child she births Jesus. It is in Joseph’s naming Jesus that he would officially claim the boy as his own. I don’t know about you, but if I were Joseph, I’d still be afraid, or at least uncomfortable with this outcome. And yet, Joseph wakes up, does what the Angel tells him to do, and courageously obeys God alongside an equally courageous and obedient Mary.

Be not afraid. Just take this mysteriously pregnant woman to be your wife, and claim the child, who will save the world, as

your own. Wow.

You see, despite the common refrain throughout scripture from angels, prophets, and even Jesus, to *be not afraid*, we are often asked to do difficult and even scary things. The phrase “be not afraid” is never a guarantee of an easy way forward. But it is an assurance that God is with us in the difficult steps ahead.

And they shall call him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

God is with us. When you look at the Greek, there’s actually no verb—just simply God-With-Us. Every word in that phrase is necessary if we are to “be not afraid.” *God*—the most sovereign omnipotent power beyond our imagination. *God with*—as in right here, right now, present. *God with us*. Not *God with me* or *God with you* or *God with him* or *her*... but *God with US*. We, the gathered! We, the community! We, together! *God. With. Us.*

If you find yourself having conceived a child with the Holy Spirit: Be not afraid, God is with us. If you find yourself marrying a young woman despite her bearing a child you did not conceive: Be not afraid, God is with us. If you find yourself beside the bed of a dying friend: Be not afraid, God is with us. If you find yourself facing bankruptcy: Be not afraid, God is with us. If you find yourself questioning your identity—whether it be a mid-life crisis or gender awareness: Be not afraid, God is with us. God is with us in these most difficult and messy times. God is *born* in these difficult and messy times.

Whatever mess you find yourself in, know that it’s not too much for God. If anything, it’s God’s comfort zone. It’s where God shows up, where God settles in, where God resides. Not despite the mess, but in the mess.

And no matter how difficult the path ahead, no matter the tears and struggle that accompany your next steps, God is already there, already in that next step.

Be not afraid. God. Is. With. Us.

When Joseph awoke from his dream, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded: he took Mary as his wife, she bore a son, and Joseph named him Jesus. Was he afraid? Maybe. Perhaps it was Joseph who coined the phrase “do it scared.” We can do hard things when we know God is with us. What hard things will you do? What hard things will we do? God is with us.

Amen.