

## **The Message of Angels: Discernment for the Distressed**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
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### **Christmas Eve**

*December 24, 2009*

*Matthew 1:18-25*

Over the past several weeks leading up to this holy night, we have been looking at the message of angels to different Biblical characters in the days prior to and following the birth of Jesus. Tonight we turn our focus on the message of an angel to a character who so often gets short shrift on Christmas Eve. I speak tonight of Joseph. We hear “Aves” to Mary upon whose lap the baby sleeps, we sing of the shepherds quaking at the sight, and the three kings of Orient bringing their gifts, and herald angels, and, of course, we sing of the baby born that night. But there are very few carols that even mention Joseph.

This is unfortunate, because Joseph plays a very important role in the story of Jesus’ birth. Without Joseph’s willingness to take Mary as his wife, she could, in that culture, have been stoned to death for being found pregnant with a child that was not his. Without Joseph’s protection, it is unlikely Mary could have safely made the trip to Bethlehem. But, according to Matthew, Joseph’s participation in the birthing of the Messiah into the world was by no means a foregone conclusion.

To really appreciate how close Joseph was to casting Mary aside altogether, imagine for a moment Joseph’s reaction when he first got wind of the fact that Mary was pregnant with a child he was sure was not his. I mean when he *first* received the news, before any angel visited him. In that culture (in any culture I suppose), to have a woman one intended to marry turn up pregnant with someone else’s child would have been a terrible affront. Righteous indignation, wounded pride, and a broken heart all would have been entirely natural responses to getting such news, as would an enormous level of skepticism at Mary’s story that the child in her womb was a gift from God and, moreover, that an angel had told her so. That would have been a hard sell for a man who was, understandably, distressed.

This is where Matthew’s Christmas story begins, with a good man in great distress. Angry, heartbroken, and skeptical to be sure, but perhaps even anxious, afraid and filled with self-doubt. What did it say about him that such a betrayal could come to him? What had he done to deserve it? What could he have done to avoid it? Why had this happened to him? Such questions are not uncommon when the circumstances of life distress us, even if there is sometimes, if not often, no good answer to them.

On this Christmas Eve, I think it is safe to affirm that most of us know or have known what it is to be distressed. Maybe not tonight and most likely not for the exact same reason Joseph was, of course. And yet perhaps there are some commonalities. On too many occasions, the future we had envisioned doesn’t turn into the present we had planned. (But then when does the future ever do that?) Family members or friends let us down, we experience betrayal and disappointment in the workplace, we can’t pull off the perfect Christmas (yet again), our personal finances are tighter than we had hoped. Death robs us of a child, a parent, a sibling, a dear friend or a spouse with whom we thought we’d grow old. The biggest December snowstorm in D.C. history hits on a wedding weekend and in the midst of a time when,

frankly, the church could really use every offering it can get to finish the year strong. In this economy, in this time when our country is engaged in two wars, in a world where at least some point to a widening gap between the haves and have-nots, most of us know what it is to be distressed at some level or other. I don't rattle off that litany to depress you, simply to acknowledge the truth that, despite the pressure this season puts on us to be cheery, none of us are immune to distress.

So it may just be that tonight we too need to hear the message that the angel delivered to Joseph in his distress. In long form, the message is, "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." But addressed to you and me, in short form, I think the message is, "Do not be afraid to embrace what is, because God can work through what is to bring goodness and love into the world."

Most of you are familiar with the cliché, "It is what it is." While the phrase is certainly overused, it strikes me that the point of it is to put the focus on dealing with the reality of our circumstances, rather than denying them or pretending that we can somehow change what has happened in the past. When someone says, "It is what it is," they are affirming, "This is what has happened, these are the facts of the matter." Only by *acknowledging* what is can we begin to *deal* with what is.

In the case of Joseph and Mary, what was, was that she was pregnant. There was no changing that this had happened. The only question was what to do about it. And Joseph, being a good man, a righteous man, wanted to do the right thing. By the law code of the day, he could have had her stoned to death, but he knew *that* wasn't the right thing to do. Instead, he decided to dismiss her quietly. No need to make a big scene in the village, just deny the whole thing ever happened and go on about his business, without too much damage to his standing in the community. And that's when the angel came to address him personally, intimately: "Joseph, son of David" and went on to say, "Don't be afraid to embrace what is."

This Christmas let me say that the first key to knowing hope in the midst of distressing circumstances in our lives and indeed the key to discerning how God might be at work in, through, beyond, and despite them is to actually accept that they have happened. It is what it is. Our circumstances are "what is." But here is the good news: the miracle of the incarnation, God taking human flesh in the form of a baby born into a humble cattle stall in a small God-forsaken town like Bethlehem, suggests that God knows well how to work with what is.

Yet, there is something in most of us that from time to time wishes we didn't have to deal with what is. I have a friend who says, "The key to living fully in the present is to give up all hope of ever having a different past." I think my friend - it's my mom! - is on to something. As seemingly comfortable as it can be to live in a state of denial, as tempting as it can be to long for our lives to have turned out differently, we ultimately have to deal with what is. Whether that be the December snowstorm of the century, an aging parent, a difficult relative, or the death of a loved one, the key is to deal with what is. And that goes for trouble on a grand scale, too: from poverty to genocide, from failing inner city schools to natural disasters, from the faltering economy to the political, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of our society.

If the first step is to embrace what is, the next and more important step is to look for how goodness and love can be borne or birthed into the world *in the midst of what is*. That's where hope and joy can be found, and that's where discernment comes in. Frederick Schmidt, an Episcopal priest and professor who used to be here in D.C. at the National Cathedral writes of discernment that it is fundamentally a process of asking "God questions" rather than "I questions." Discernment, Schmidt says, "is the task or process of distinguishing the Spirit of presence of God at work in the world from other competing spirits in order to determine where the spirit of God may be moving."

What the angel did for Joseph was to help him see how the Spirit of God was at work in Mary's pregnancy and that knowledge helped Joseph to do the right thing. For me, one of the key questions of discernment is always, "How can the love of God best be borne, fleshed out, in the world through me and through my community of faith, even in the worst of circumstances?"

A member of this congregation shared with me that at the Kennedy Center honors a few weeks ago, Meryl Streep said, in introducing Robert DeNiro (I think), that she asked someone, "What is transformation?" And he replied, "Transformation begins with one little change." An interesting thought for a Christmas Eve. Perhaps all transformations do begin with one little change. Often it is a change in perspective, a move from asking "I-questions" (How can *I* benefit from this? What did *I* do to deserve this happening to me? How can *I* save face? How can *I* look good?) to asking "God-questions." (How might *God* somehow be working through what is, even if "what is" seems to be terrible? How might "what is" be an opportunity to know or to show *God's* healing love? How can I be a participant in what *God* is doing?) That was the subtle shift that happened in Joseph after the angel came. The question was no longer about how he was going to look; the question was about how God and goodness could come into the world through what he did.

Tonight I celebrate that this congregation and indeed the larger world is full of people who, like Joseph, know the power of dealing with "what is" and letting God use them to shape a world that could be. I think of the young bride who patiently works with second graders in an inner city school, when she could just as easily have landed a teaching position in a much more affluent setting... Actually, I think of any teacher anywhere who dedicates him or herself to educating students - bringing them out of themselves, helping them learn and develop into more compassionate, creative people.

When it comes to dealing with what is and discerning what God might do, I think of the addict who has come to admit that his life has become unmanageable and to trust that a power greater than himself can restore him to sanity... I think of the countless people who have used their own experience of grief and loss to shape how they respond to others' pain... I think of all the people caring for elderly parents, or spouses, or friends, even though that is not by any means always easy. And I think of the people all across this region who, last weekend, picked up snow shovels to help dig other people out.

I think, too, of all the people who see their occupation, whatever it happens to be and no matter how messy its realities, not just as an opportunity to make money, but as a vocation, a way to somehow shape the world into a better place. From the realtor who takes pride in finding the right, affordable house for a young couple to the researcher who sets out to discover cure for cancer, from the State Department employee to the C.E.O., from the doctor caring for patients to the officer leading men and women in

harm's way, from the small business owner who tries to do the right thing by his customers to the lawyer or the cog in the corporate machine who will not bow to the pressure to do something unethical just because it is expedient. And I think of the people who are so committed to how God is at work in and through this congregation, its programs, its staff, and its benevolences that they have been willing to step up and give more or do more in a time of uncertainty. And I think, too, of all those who would if they could.

It is what it is. But what is it for you? Where is some angel of God, supernatural or as human as you and me, speaking to you in your own or someone else's distress? Listen! And then consider how the love of God can be birthed anew into the world, through you and through your community of faith. "*And they shall name him Immanuel*, which means God is with us."

*Amen.*

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