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Isaiah 7:10-17 & Matthew 1:18-25
“Do Not Be Afraid”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 7:10-17

¹⁰Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

Gospel Lesson Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Have you ever noticed that we don’t really talk about Joseph. I mean, he’s the man who helped raise Jesus, but the stories of scripture actually say VERY little about him. Mary seems to pull all the attention. Artists throughout the centuries have pictured Mary as a serene, beautiful young girl and place her at the center of the Christmas drama. There are countless famous representations of Madonna and child but few, if any, equally portraits of father and son. When

we think about our annual Christmas Pageants, even the angels, shepherds and Wise Men get more attention than Joseph. In some Christmas pageants, Joseph doesn't even get a speaking part.

This situation is due in part to the fact that our Christmas celebrations are shaped by Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. Luke makes Mary the central figure of the story and draws us the beautiful, picture-perfect image of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew takes a slightly different approach – In Matthew there is no visit from an Angel There is no decree from the Roman Emperor, there is no trip to Bethlehem for the census, there is no Inn, there is no manger. Here in Matthew, we get a little glimpse of Joseph – of course, after our passage this morning he pretty much disappears again, **but** here in Matthew, we do get an idea of what is going on in Joseph's head.

The major similarity between Matthew and Luke's birth narratives that I see is the very human reaction of the expectant parents – and the divine response. Both Mary and Joseph are fearful. And in both gospels, we see this command, *"Do not be afraid"*

In Luke, these words are spoken by the Angel Gabriel to Mary before she is told that she is going to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. In Matthew, these words are delivered to Joseph by the Lord in a dream.

But why would Joseph be fearful? He wasn't the teenage girl about to endure the judgement of all those in her community; he wasn't the teenage girl who was about to become the grist for the rumor mill; he wasn't the girl who was going to fear for her life because, as custom dictated, she could be stoned for infidelity.

What did Joseph have to fear?

Everyone knew who his people were – he was a descendant of the House of David, the revered King of Israel. The biblical tradition tells us that Joseph was a Carpenter – a tradesperson which would have put him squarely in the Middle Class of his time and local economy. He was engaged to be married. So, while Mary was still living in her father's house, Joseph was established enough to have his own home and enough respect to have a marriage arranged for him.

While I don't know this for sure, maybe Joseph was afraid of the reflected notoriety, or the unwanted attention that would come with having his betrothed mysteriously become pregnant before they were married and living together. Maybe he was afraid that people were going to look at him with pity in their eyes; that people might think he has had his dignity diminished in some way. All of which would have been a huge challenge to the mindset of masculinity that dominated the time-period.

Unfortunately, I am concerned that too many men today still worry about such things – that the fragile male ego hasn't evolved very much.

Whatever it was that scared Joseph, Matthew makes it clear that it was enough – it was enough for him to break the engagement. Scripture tells us that Joseph is a righteous man – that could have been understood in a few different ways in accordance with the cultural expectations. Righteousness in the strictest understanding would have expected Joseph to parade Mary in front of the community so she could be stoned. But Joseph must have had a very good Rabbi because he understands that the heart of the law is mercy.

Instead of punishing Mary, he decides to break the engagement quietly. He wants to spare her public disgrace. It is at this moment, after making that decision, that the Lord appears to him in a dream saying,

“Do not be afraid.”

“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 should name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

The Lord tells Joseph to step forward. To step forward without fear *into a new role*; Into a new responsibility so that the Lord's prophecy could be fulfilled and “Emmanuel” – “God with us,” could enter the world.

In telling the story in this way, I think Matthew is saying something very profound. Like I have said, in Luke, the Angel Gabriel goes directly to Mary, the person at the center of the unfolding drama. Here in Matthew, The Lord goes to the supporting character, to make it clear that he has a crucial role. Here in Matthew, the Lord goes to the man who comes from a recognizable family line; The Lord goes to the man with a good job and a steady income; The Lord goes to the man – to the one who has any measure of power and privilege that society might bestow and says, don't be afraid to risk what you have.

Don't be afraid to stand by this woman and this baby.

Don't be afraid of the change.

Don't be afraid to let go of the entitlements that you might expect in this moment.

Don't be afraid, because **you** are a crucial part of birthing “Emmanuel, God with us,” into the world.

Recently I was listening to a podcast hosted by a Professor of Bible at a Hendricks College and a Jewish Biblical Scholar. They are a great team, sharing insights on the biblical texts assigned to our lectionary. During the podcast about today's passage Amy Robertson, the Jewish member of the team, shared an interesting insight. She said, “There is a Hebrew word and mindset – the word is ANAVA – translated as humility, but it's not humility that assumes you have to make yourself really small. Anava assumes that you have

to know when to be bigger and when to dial it back. Anava asks you to understand and appreciate what is your God-given role in this place and this time and in this situation – it's constantly a balance¹.”

She goes on to say that here in Matthew, she sees in Joseph an active sense of ANAVA – In the world at that time, it would be natural for Joseph to think his engagement, wedding, and family life are going to unfold in a certain way. But instead, that will definitely not be the case. And instead of reacting the way the society around him would expect, he is asked to step into this other role; he is asked to step into fatherhood of this child – He doesn't get to walk away and ignore the situation; he doesn't get to be totally passive – he has a role here that he needs to step into. He has a role here that the Lord needs him to step into so that Emmanuel – “God with us” can come into the world.

And he just does it

Joseph is needed – in very real and important ways for the prophecy to be fulfilled, he puts Jesus into the lineage of David – But in a practical, life-giving and life-saving way, Joseph lends his credibility and stability to Mary so that God's miracle may be borne into the world.

Matthew's version of this story is profound for us as we make our way to Christmas morning to worship and adore the promised child, the birth of the prince of peace, our Emmanuel. God came into the world so long ago, but God's voice, God's love continues to be borne into the world each day in the lives of everyday people; In young teenage girls, In communities of color plagued by crime and poverty, In members of the LGBTQ+ community, And right here in the pews of this church.

God's love comes into the world to challenge the structures and systems that marginalize God's people and keep God's children living separated one from another and from God. To those at the center of these realities, God comes and says, do not be afraid. For I am about to do a new thing. In you my love will rise and give voice to peace and justice for all people. In the same way, just as the Lord did with Joseph, God will come to us and say, **“do not be afraid!”** Do not be afraid to let go of the way things have always been, Do not be afraid to stand with your siblings in Christ, Do not be afraid to listen, Do not be afraid to amplify the voices of others who need to be heard. Do not be afraid for you will help bring forth the justice and righteousness this world so desperately needs.

We do not have enough examples of people using their own power and privilege to do this important work today. We don't because it is risky. Recently the world saw a beautiful example of someone standing in the mold of Joseph,

¹ Robertson, Amy

someone with a measure of power exhibiting a profound sense of ANAVA.

Lizzo is a Plus-Size hip-hop super star. She is a classically trained flautist who regularly raps, sings, dances, and plays the flute to the delight of fans around the world. She embraces body positivity and helps people to see themselves in an industry that is hyper focused on and rewards people for fitting into a very specific mold. Recently Lizzo was recognized by the People's Choice Awards for her impact on music and television as well as her commitment to championing diversity and inclusion.

Let's hear briefly from Lizzo:

(Zach start's the video - it starts with Lizzie saying "So, I'm gonna be honest..." and ends after she introduces Emiliana Guereca.)

In total, Lizzo shares the names and stories of 17 women who are creating change in their communities and in the world. She amplifies the work of peoples long silenced who are in their own ways working to usher in God's love each and every day.

In her acceptance speech Lizzo said, "Being an icon isn't about how long you've had your platform, it's about what you do with that platform." In the same way, here in Matthew, the Lord is saying to Joseph and to each of us, it's not about how righteous we are, it's about how our righteousness and faith inspires and helps usher in the love and grace of God in the world around us.

Friends, do not be afraid.

In the story of Mary and Joseph, we are reminded that often, the work of God arises from the most unexpected yet common places. We are called to recognize the work of God in the world and to realize that we have a part to play in bringing it forward.

Friends, do not be afraid.

It is safe to assume that recognizing the coming of God into the world will require much of us, but it will also ENABLE much by us. Do not be afraid to risk what you have; Do not be afraid to stand with the marginalized and powerless; Do not be afraid of the change. Do not be afraid to let go of the entitlements that we might be enjoying in this moment. For the power of God comes into the world, Emmanuel, "God with us!" In a baby, named Jesus so that people might be saved from our sins. And YOU are a crucial part of this work.

Oh Lord, may it be so, and may we all be conduits of this grace each and every day.

Amen and Amen.