

Acting on the Unbelievable—Angels of Christmas 3

Matthew 1:18-25

December 11, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

I had occasion to drive through Hallettsville one evening this week after dark. Like lots of small county seats, their courthouse is lit quite nicely for Christmas. It's a classic courthouse on a square just off the main highway. Storefronts line each side of the square. They have lights strung from the tipitty top of the courthouse all the way across the streets to the top stories of the storefronts. It creates kind of a circus tent effect, definitely enough to catch my attention from a block away on the highway. So I took a turn around the courthouse square. The whole courthouse is outlined in white lights, and the lawn is full of decorations of various kinds. There's a door on each side of the courthouse, and above each door, there appeared the words of the Advent wreath! Hope, peace, joy, and love, right there on the Lavaca County courthouse. We're no closer to finding out their origin, but you can imagine my delight to see them in an unexpected place. Four Sundays of Advent correspond nicely to the north, south, east, and west doors into the courthouse.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy. In Catholic or Anglican or Episcopalian churches, this Sunday is called "Gaudete" Sunday, which is Latin for "Rejoice!" The pink candle comes from those traditions too, a lightening of color and of spirit on this third Sunday of Advent. So that all fits together, and our reading about angels appearing in the Christmas story is the recounting of the unnamed angel appearing to Joseph. I'm fairly certain that "joy" was not Joseph's first reaction to the angel's news. Much as Mary's reaction to the angel's announcement was not initially peace, but she eventually came to a place of peace, Joseph will eventually make it to a place of joy.

Joseph starts out in whatever the opposite of joy is. Maybe despair? Discouragement? Disappointment? Resignation? He's there. His betrothed, which was more than engaged, less than married, his betrothed is found to be pregnant. We know, because Matthew tells us, that the child is from the Holy Spirit, but Joseph doesn't know this yet. All he knows is that he isn't the father. He is dismayed, of course. But Matthew describes him as righteous, and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. Even in his despair, Joseph is merciful, and that mercy is seen as righteousness. That combination of mercy and righteousness certainly foreshadows the ministry of Jesus, doesn't it?

In the midst of this despair and mercy and decision making, the angel appears. Is it Gabriel, the same angel that appeared to Mary? No idea. This angel appears to Joseph in a dream. The Joseph of Genesis, he of the many colored coat, also received messages from God in his dreams, so for this Joseph to hear from God in a dream is not too surprising. He's the only recipient of angel messages in dreams, in the Gospels, but it's clear in the very least that humans shouldn't go about limiting where and when and how God might speak to us and where and when and how God might send angels to us.

The angel's message is remarkably similar to Gabriel's message to Mary. They both receive a "don't be afraid" message, right at the beginning. Gabriel calls Mary favored one; this angel reminds Joseph he is from David's family line. This will be important for Jesus to trace his lineage through the royal ancestors. Gabriel told Mary the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and the child to be born would be holy, the Son of God. This angel tells Joseph that the child is from the Holy Spirit. Gabriel tells Mary she will have a son and will name him Jesus. This angel tells Joseph that Mary will have a son and for Joseph to name him Jesus. This angel adds that Jesus will save his people from their sins. I think we said in Bible Study last week that the Hebrew root behind Jesus is the same as the name Joshua, and it all comes from the same root as the verb "to save," so it all makes sense that a holy child named Jesus will save the people from their sins.

Anyway, Gabriel and Joseph's angel have essentially the same message for each of Jesus's parents, tailored a bit to their particular situations and circumstances and places in society, but it's remarkably similar.

When confronted with the appearance of an angel, both Zechariah and Mary engage in conversation. "How will I know this is so?" from Zechariah, and "How can this be?" from Mary. Joseph, though, says nothing. Maybe that's because it's a dream, and we can't always do what we want to do in dreams. In my worst dreams, I can't see and I can't find my glasses, so maybe Joseph really wants to ask the angel something but just can't, because it's a dream. But Joseph already has the sign. Joseph already has the confirmation. He already knows Mary is pregnant. The questions Joseph has...how exactly is this baby from the Holy Spirit? For instance, are more than he can begin to put into words, likely. But in any case, Joseph doesn't question the angel.

Zechariah eventually sees his hopes realized, in the birth of John the Baptist. Mary eventually comes to peace as she says "yes" to God, and acts in accordance with God's purposes. Joseph, more than either Zechariah and Mary, has to *choose* to respond to God's messengers. He could have gone along with his

original, righteous plan to dismiss Mary quietly. He has to change his mind and act in response to the angel's message. "When Joseph awoke from sleep," Matthew tells us, "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

Joseph obeys exactly what the angel told him to do. And then he all but disappears. He never speaks. He appears in Luke's Gospel when the twelve year old Jesus stays behind in the Temple, and his parents have to go back to retrieve him. In a couple of places, Jesus is referred to as "Joseph's son" or "the carpenter's son," but Joseph doesn't speak or take any actions that we know of.

But in this most important of moments, Joseph recognizes his dream as a message from God, and responds in righteous faithfulness. In this, he enables joy to come to the world.