

Advent 4, Year A, 121910
All Saints Episcopal Church

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid..."

I don't know quite how it started, but for as long as I can remember, I have been in love with the Advent and Christmas seasons. Perhaps it was the nightly meals when my family gathered around the dining room table to light the candles on the Advent wreath and listen to my father read the collect in his smooth and comforting voice. Perhaps it was the crèches that we had around the house, which my mother didn't seem to mind if I rearranged all the figures every time I passed one of them. Perhaps it was the music, which I heard at home from the time I was a baby and which I learned to sing in every choir I was in in every church we ever belonged to. Some of the music was joyous, of course, but some of it was full of longing, almost melancholy, and it filled me with a true sense, I think, of the struggle between the stories of sweet baby Jesus in the manger and the adult Jesus on the Cross...the pull between the now and the not yet.

In my adult life, I have become a collector of crèches and Advent/Christmas music. I place the crèches around the house, carefully arranging them and rearranging them until I think they are just right. Some of them are the crèches of my childhood. The music, mostly CDs now instead of records (some of you won't know what those are), is both secular and great church music, and I am gradually getting it all loaded onto my iPod.

Many of the same hymns and carols appear on a number of different albums. One carol, though, I think is only on one, maybe two, of my albums. It is called 'The Cherry Tree Carol' and is different in that it is a story not only about Mary, but about Joseph as well. You know, Joseph doesn't get to be in much of the Christmas story and especially not in the rest of the story of Jesus. Once the Wise Men show up and Joseph has the dream that tells him to take the family to Egypt, he's pretty much gone from the narrative. Even in my crèches, sometimes it's hard to tell which figure is Joseph and which is a shepherd!

So this carol, and today's Gospel reading, in which Joseph receives the news about Mary's pregnancy, are not the usual fare. In the carol Mary and Joseph are walking one day. Along the way the expectant mother Mary is hungry and asks Joseph to stop and get her a cherry from an orchard they are passing, for the baby. Joseph

snaps back bitterly, telling her to let the child's father get him a cherry to eat:

*Then Joseph flew in anger, in anger flew he,
Let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee.*

It's a beautiful carol when you hear it, but when you listen to the words, there's a lot of anger and bitterness in them really. Now I don't know about you, but I understand that. I get the depiction of Joseph as angry about the situation in which he found himself. He was a righteous man. He hadn't done anything wrong. He was respecting the betrothal period, waiting for Mary to become his wife. He was doing everything exactly right when suddenly, out of the blue, he is told his fiancée, the woman he was supposed to be marrying, is pregnant, and he knows it's not his child. Anger like that in "The Cherry Tree Carol" sounds about right.

Anger and fear. Who would believe him? Would the men at the synagogue still trust him? Would those who counted him among the righteous now look down their noses at him, dismiss him, disrespect him? Would they even do business with him?

And what were his choices? The law said he could be rid of her, divorce her if he's nice, even have her stoned if he wanted to. So even if he was rid of Mary, would they let him back in their circles? Was he already marked as a weak man? And if he stayed with her would they look at him as stupid, taken advantage of by his wandering wife? Would he ever have a place in the community again?

Do not be afraid. "Right," Joseph must have thought when he awoke from his very CRAZY dream. Do not be afraid. Don't be afraid! It's just your fiancée who is pregnant. Don't be afraid! I know it's not yours. Don't be afraid! It's just a baby made by God. Don't be afraid! Keep your wife; keep your baby. It'll all work, and he'll even save the people. Don't worry. Don't be afraid. Right. Sure, he must have been thinking.

Well, of course, he was afraid. He was scared out of his mind. Who wouldn't be? His life was a mess. Nothing was the way he imagined it would be. Nothing was going according to his well-thought-out, well-deserved plans. His relationships were a mess. His place in the community with his friends was uncertain. His ability to work, to provide for himself and this family, if he were to choose to accept this situation, was in complete jeopardy. His life was in utter turmoil; he was being consumed by the suffocating darkness of fear.

When I was in the first grade, we lived in Gulfport. Now if you've ever been to the beach there, you'll know that the water never gets very deep and there's not much in the way of wave action at all. So I had not learned to swim yet when we went on a vacation to Destin, and I had never dealt with 'real' waves. So on my first adventure into the water, I remember being a little scared of the force of the water as the waves broke in front of me. And since I couldn't swim, I was basically relegated to standing around or jumping up and down in the water. But at one point, with my back turned, a big wave came up and broke right where I was.

Down I went, under the water, completely taken by surprise! The force of the wave turned me upside down and sideways. I didn't know what was up or what was down, where the air was or where the sandy bottom was. The salt water stung my eyes and filled up my ears and burned as it went up my nose, and even though the water there was that beautiful color of crystal blue green, when I was down there it was total darkness...a total nightmare.

This Advent world we live in is like that underwater nightmare, too. It's like Joseph's world. It's an uncertain place. It's a world where relationships are messy, even painful. It's a world where our jobs are insecure. It's a world where betrayal breeds mistrust, where the ones we hope are righteous seem careless, where people make decisions out of anger and fear. People are going hungry. People are tossed around systems and cities, cold, disoriented, and lonely. People are at war with one another. It's a world where, like winter, the days only seem darker and darker as they pass, suffocating us with worry and anxiety.

It is a panicky situation. Disoriented, it's hard to figure out which way is up, which way will take us back to the surface. Thrown about by powerful tides it's difficult to know which way to turn to put the sandy ocean floor below our feet again. It's terrifying, facing these violent days that threaten our comfort, our security, our faith.

Yet, like Joseph, we are challenged to hear the angel's words, "Do not be afraid." While he tossed and turned in his restless sleep, he was reassured by a divine vision, "Do not be afraid." Like a child stumbling around in the dark, trying to find his way to his mother's calming arms. Like a swimmer opening her eyes, even just a crack, letting the salt water sting for just a little while she peeks looking, hoping for a glimmer of light - - "Do not be afraid." The light tells you which way is up. The light reorients you, gives you the direction to go. The light carries you to surface where there is air and freedom and life.

Joseph was a righteous man. He was a human man. He wasn't above anger. He wasn't above fear. He was a human being facing his worst nightmare, and his first response was completely understandable - - get out of there. But then he saw the glimmer. In his darkest night he saw the light of God's love shimmering even in the middle of his pain. Even in the middle of his deepest fears, he opened his eyes, opened his life to the light that would bring him up to the surface, the light that would save him carry him from despair. Joseph chose love.

Do not be afraid for the child is Emmanuel, God with us. Do not be afraid because he is God's presence, God's life. Do not be afraid because every pain you feel, every loss you mourn, even anxiety you experience, you will experience with him at your side. Do not be afraid. You are not alone. We are not alone. The world has not been abandoned, left to suffer in darkness. Do not be afraid because God sends a savior to accompany us, to heal us, to carry us into God's marvelous light. Do not be afraid. God is with us.