

“Daring Love”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Second Sunday of Advent

Edina Morningside Community Church; December 6, 2020

Matthew 1:1, 16-25

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. [Here reads all the generations before and after David the King, until we come to:] Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Now 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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, 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.

Last weekend, Javen and I watched “All is Calm” on PBS, a retelling of the 1914 Christmas truce by our local Theatre Latte Da in Minneapolis. This annual production, now televised, describes the early months of World War I, and how opposing British, French and German soldiers would taunt each other from trenches that were only a few hundred yards apart. Using the writings of combatants, it tells of how they used to sing bawdy songs as well, when they weren’t sniping and shelling at one another. Then on Christmas Eve of 1914, one German soldier started something remarkable. He dared to come out of his trench and into the barbed-wire No-Man’s-Land, bearing no weapon, but singing “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht”. Eyewitness letters and diaries from that season describe what happened next, how the music drew soldiers from opposing trenches to meet each other in the barbed-wire No-Man’s-Land, singing carols, playing football, exchanging presents, and burying the dead. Commanders on each side broke up the party by the next morning, and it never happened again in subsequent years, but the world is still telling the story of how even war itself stopped on Christmas Eve, to sing the birth of the Prince of Peace.

I have been conditioned by cynicism to believe this is impossible, such that I started watching the film with skepticism. It seems like an idealist’s fantasy, a story that would be dreamed up by some romantic poet. And yet as I heard one man’s words after another describe what actually happened, I began to marvel that the echoes of this single event still persist. It may have been one single night in the midst of years of war, but it’s *still* serving—a hundred years later—as a sign that peace is possible between enemies. Such courage shown by those men, especially the first German soldier who resisted doing what was expected of him, what was safe and normal, but who instead stepped out singing, though it could cost him his life. His daring love created a moment that continues to reverberate through the ages.

We marvel at such stories of wonder this time of year, and we feel the power that carols and music play in such times of awe. That’s the focus of our Advent series, “I Believe Even When”, using the words of an anonymous resident of a concentration camp to speak and sing our faith that love incarnate is still possible. This year especially, worshipping from our separate living spaces because of Covid, we seek to fill the night with music and light. No matter where human beings live, what we look like or believe, we

know the power of music to give courage, connect, and make real what seems fantastical. We lift up as heroes those who—like one soldier—dare to play a part in making it so.

The alternative is to let fear, convention, and “following the rules” have control instead, keeping humanity from creating something new and better. That’s the struggle Joseph felt when he heard that Mary would give birth. Convention taught that she must have done something wrong, and so their engagement should not go forward. Indeed, Joseph himself sought to “dismiss her quietly”, which is what society and custom expected of a righteous Jewish man (never mind that it would make homeless this young woman and their child). Ingrained sexism and fearing the judgment of society was about to break up this family, even though Joseph loved and cared for Mary. But God cares more about liberation rather than satisfying human conventions. So an angel intervenes with Joseph by night, telling him “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife”, because God is doing a new thing for all humanity. When he wakes, Joseph decides to resist his fear of societal judgment and with daring love chooses loyalty to Mary’s life instead. A great cheer must have gone up in heaven at this moment, because this choice to do the harder thing despite fear, judgment and discomfort leads to an enormous payoff that changes the course of human history.

The forces of social convention and “not rocking the boat” remain strong though. Over the past several months, I’ve been challenged about the fact that our church has a “Black Lives Matter” sign in front of it, which has been there since the killing of George Floyd and the racial uprisings this summer. There are a few who see this sign as a partisan statement, or as an endorsement of violence. Some public voices of division and white supremacy have convinced good people to believe that the statement “Black Lives Matter” is frightening or offensive. I’ve been told that our sign makes it harder for those folks to feel a part of this church. In response, I’ve honestly been tempted to just take down the sign and keep the peace. It would make my life a little easier by avoiding some hard conversations. But that would be an implicit agreement with a status quo that serves White comfort, finding a sign more objectionable than the threats on Black lives every day. It would be seeking a superficial peace that is an absence of tension for some, rather than the presence of justice for all. In truth though, creating right relationships through the love of God means that racial fears and sinful divisions must be cast down. Such daring love will require those accustomed to the old injustices to be discomforted. The good news is that humans can get over being uncomfortable, because the benefits of such growth are justice, mercy, and endless love. Joseph and Mary learned that despite their unconventional family, this child born to them was a sign to all the world that “God is with us”, and would deliver people from the sins of violence, war, and injustice. Even though it’s uncomfortable sometimes and requires courage, what’s better than that??

I tell you all this because I know that you face such choices as well. Christians are called to walk in the ways of Jesus despite an unjust world, yet that often asks us to face our fears or be uncomfortable. In the coming weeks, our ministry partners are going to ask you to show up with your time and voice alongside those in our community who are poor and outcast. Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative will ask you to join in action to help fund affordable housing at a legislative launch event on January 21st. ISAIAH will ask you to join a statewide convening just a few days later, rallying online with thousands of other Minnesotans on January 24th. These events will be online, hours long, and address public policy changes. They will bring us into community with people who look and worship differently from us. I’m guessing that adds up to a fair amount of discomfort as you consider it, but I challenge you to plan now to join dozens from EMC attending both events. Your presence will be a faithful decision to grow through discomfort, building powerful new paths for God’s payoff of justice and love. There are other ways of helping our communities better represent the values of Jesus, to be sure, and perhaps you’ll need to choose those ways instead. But whenever you are called to stretch with discomfort in the coming days, I hope you will recognize it as a divine goosing into growth, and hear the angel say to you also: “do not be afraid”. Will we stay in our customary trenches of fear, division, and isolation, or in daring love like

Joseph, Mary, and those soldiers in 1914, will we step toward one another to create something new and heaven-sent?

God's Holy Spirit would give birth to a new earth through such actions in us. We will see those without homes be housed, those who go hungry be fed, those attacked as outsiders be protected, and the planet itself will find healing. This is what lies before us in the coming of Emmanuel. God promises to be present, even in the face of our fear. Joseph heard it from the angel, Mary experienced it as she gave birth to Jesus, and we will see it too: God is with us! Amen.