

## **“Seeking Joy in Hard Choices”**

Matthew 1:18-25 and Isaiah 35:1-10

December 11, 2022 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Last week in the Gospel of Luke, we heard the angel Gabriel, who said to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” This week, it is Joseph’s turn to hear these words. Just as we focused on peace and considered its relationship to fear on the second Sunday of Advent, we focus on joy this third Sunday of Advent, and reflect on the ways that fear runs counter to joy.

Our text, from the Gospel of Matthew, describes the conversation between an angel and Joseph. We can imagine how this is all unfolding from Joseph’s perspective, based on the Gospel’s description of that time and place, and grounded in the customs and conventions of society at that time. The main feature of life then was almost complete gender separation. The women stayed near their tiny two-room houses, caring for the children, the garden, and chickens. They fetched water, cooked in a semipublic courtyard, and milked goats, which is what scholars imagine Mary did too. Men worked in the fields, or in the case of Joseph, with their hands, carving stone or building houses.

As far as Joseph knows, his new wife has been unfaithful to him and broken their marriage contract. And yet, instead of punishment, he chooses not to publicly disgrace or humiliate her. This interruption in his life becomes a holy invitation when the angel comes to him in a dream and says, “Do not be afraid.” When he awakes, Joseph once again has the courage to choose a better way. He chooses to stay with Mary, to become an adoptive parent. He chooses peace over violence, grace over condemnation. Like Mary, he chooses to say “yes.” This narrative leads us to contemplate, when have our ancestors also chosen a better way, and when have they not?

This story always raises a question for me. Why did it take divine intervention for Joseph to choose the better way? It took a vision and a celestial being for Joseph not to abandon his partner. Part of me is frustrated with Joseph. It took the hand of God for him to choose a better way! But when I reflect upon my frustration, I realize in many ways we are each Joseph. Every day we are faced with opportunities to do and be better in our relationships with one another and the world. Yet, when we are faced with that moment to put our

privilege and power at risk—to do what is right—we often decline to engage. Risk discomforts power.

Too often, we miss the opportunity to do and say the right thing in support of people who are being pushed aside or ignored or mistreated. We see what is happening to our planet yet continue with business as usual.

We hesitate to risk our relationships, jobs, or reputations, but we see there are people in need of advocacy, and our planet needs protection. What would happen if the divine intervened and demanded of us that we take the better way? Why should doing the right thing take divine intervention?

And as we imagine beyond the immediate impact we could make in such circumstances, what about the generational effect? As we contemplate our Advent series, “From Generation to Generation,” how might our choices shape the future? In an article for “Ecoresolution,” the writer, Charlotte Akers, describes “seven generation thinking,” an ancient Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) philosophy, which emphasizes how we have been impacted by seven generations before us, and how our decisions today can positively impact seven generations after us.

Think about it: while we plan where our next meal might come from, we are also capable of making future career plans. When we plan where we will plant our seeds, we are also thinking ahead to the fruits we will receive. And while plans rarely, well, go to plan, nevertheless we continue to reflect upon our futures: where we may be when we are hopefully old and gray.

Yet, when it comes to thinking further ahead - beyond our own lifetime - we are surprisingly ill-equipped. Often, while we may be able to reflect upon our children’s future lives, and perhaps their children, we struggle to think beyond this timespan.

This is reflected (to the extreme) in many aspects of our society: governmental systems often work on a 4 or 5 year cycle; business plans look to the next quarter; and social media is so innately biased towards short-termism, 3 seconds is considered a ‘view’ on a video. As a result, in our culture of politics, marketing, consumerism and even our online identities, short-term successes are rewarded over long-term wellness.

In a ‘chicken or egg’ kind of cycle, this cultural fore-fronting of short-term success in many aspects of certain societies has further cemented our own short-sightedness. But like many aspects of our culture, the importance of short-term success is just one story, one narrative. This is where seven generation thinking comes into play.

In this article, Akers asserts, “In a world preoccupied with short-term success, achieving a sense of purpose, community, and belonging feels like a never-ending chase: forever beyond the next hurdle. Once we situate ourselves within this wider chain of those before us and those to come, we can begin to see how our purpose and belonging is built within the fact of our own existence.”

One powerful illustration of this kind of long-term thinking is the establishment of our national parks. This week I came across the fact that Yellowstone National Park celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary this past spring. It was established in 1872 by President Grant. Our first national park, out of a total of 63 in the United States. It is nearly 3,500 miles square, covering parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. This year, Yellowstone has been selling park passes for the year 2172, 150 years from now, which is the timespan of seven generations. This offer is an attempt to instill in us the ability to imagine a future with Yellowstone in it. They’ve entitled it, “The Inheritance Pass.” What have we inherited by virtue of the national park system, and what do we hope future generations will inherit?

This initiative emphasizes the importance of preservation—both now and for future generations. What might all of this have to do with joy? This Yellowstone campaign is a tangible way to live out Isaiah’s prophecy of a wilderness blooming.

As we listen to the prophet Isaiah, we are provided a vision of what happens when we choose a better way: the wilderness blooms, water breaks forth in the desert, eyes are opened, ears are unstopped, sorrow and sadness flee away. A highway shall appear, and it will become a holy way. This is a joy-filled scene that is rooted in our decisions. When we can vision the outcome of our choices, even when they are difficult, the possibility for joy is made evident.

And circling back to the scene in which Joseph faces such a hard choice, where is the joy? When Joseph awoke from his dream, could he envision the

joy of raising this child alongside Mary? I mean, imagine what could have happened if Joseph didn't choose to heed the angel's command and take Mary as his wife. What might have happened to Mary and her newborn? How might the Christmas story have unfolded had Joseph made a different choice? And as we engage our imaginations and our wonderment, I wonder about Mary and Joseph's relationship in the aftermath of the dream. What was in Mary's heart and on her tongue as Joseph told her about the dream that changed everything? What did Mary's face look like as Joseph confessed that saving her and the baby took the work of a divine dream and command? I hope he eventually realized that doing right by her shouldn't have necessitated divine intervention. I hope we might be people who do not need convincing that there is a better way. Let's choose the better way and risk solidarity with one another. There can be such joy in that! Amen

This story ignites our imaginations and raises so many questions! There are many directions you might go this morning, as we enter a short time of quiet reflection. Notice in what direction your heart feels called as you consider the reflection questions: