

*Come Now and Set Us Free
Freedom to Become*

Matthew 1:18-25

Call to Worship

Yesterday was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. Which means that today is the day that holds the most darkness. And for us it is also the day in our Advent journey when the light comes into its full measure. Ancient people called this day “the birthday of the unconquered sun.” Hope and light are just about to break over us. The darkness has not defeated the light. It never has.

And so, on this day darkness and light come right up alongside each other, as they do in Daniel Berrigan’s Advent Credo. I invite you to join me in in the responses.

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss.
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him will know: you shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction.
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever.
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder. His name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, prince of peace.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church, before we can be peacemakers.
This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions and your old people shall dream dreams.

Your night has already reached its greatest length. It can come no farther; now it begins to withdraw. The beams of light are already more visible. We see it; we know it: Jesus the Christ comes, with joy, with faith, with courage, to be light—to be life—to the world.

Sermon

When I was working at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, I got to know a couple whose names were Charles and Frances Townes. They were already well into their 80’s when I knew them, and both of them have died since, but they were memorable characters. Charlie won the Nobel prize in Physics in 1964, for work in quantum mechanics that led directly to the invention

of the maser, and then the laser. He did that work at MIT, and then he joined the faculty at the University of California. I think he went to his office every day until the day he died—which he could do, because winning a Nobel prize is how you get a reserved parking space on the Cal campus. I'm not kidding. It's a rule.

Charlie never let the honor of the Nobel prize—or the Templeton prize, or many others he won—go to his head; he was a kind, generous, humble man. But of course he was often asked to speak publicly and to write about his life. He was pretty famous in scientific circles. Frances, his wife, was loyal and supportive, but she was a formidable person in her own right. And I think she struggled some with living in the shadow of her famous husband. When Charlie published a memoir entitled *How the Laser Happened: Adventures of a Scientist*, Frances went to work on her own memoir. She called it *Misadventures of a Scientist's Wife*.

It's hard to live in someone else's shadow. I think of that as we read the story of Joseph this morning. Joseph who was Jesus' father (sort of) and Mary's husband, but not in a way that has much impact on the way she is remembered. Joseph who disappears from the picture of Jesus early in his life.

Really, Joseph is the biblical character who most reminds us of the ordinariness into which Jesus was born. We read this morning almost all the words there are in the Bible about Joseph. His name is mentioned in only two of the four Gospels in the New Testament. Only Matthew says that an angel appeared to him. From the beginning, the story of this human father of Jesus is told as if he is a Brand X, forgettable fellow. Someone whose hopes for his life, his family's life, were entirely conventional before he found out that his fiancée was pregnant. A laborer who probably grew up imagining himself married to someone who would proudly call herself 'the carpenter's wife', and having a son whose greatest ambition would be to take over his father's furniture business.

And then this. Unlike Luke, Matthew doesn't say anything about an angel coming to Mary. In a better reflection of a patriarchal time and context, the angel comes to Joseph, tells *him* not to be afraid. It happens, Matthew says, when Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, when she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Some translations say simply, when "Mary was found to be pregnant."

Well, that begs for a longer story, doesn't it? How did Joseph 'find Mary to be pregnant'? Was it after she unexplainably left town and went to her cousin Elizabeth's, and came back three months later with a baby bump? Did she tell him before she left? Did he hear from somebody else? Were there tense, maybe accusing, conversations *before* Joseph had a dream about an angel saying, 'It's going to be OK'? How could there not have been?

In the first century, in the place Joseph and Mary lived, engagement wasn't a romantic promise made by two people who had fallen in love. It was a contract, binding not only on them but on their families. Legally, they were as good as married; they just weren't living together yet. And Joseph was a 'righteous man', we are told. That means he was someone who has followed the rules—of his religion, his society, his family. Joseph is a person who knows right from wrong.

His fiancée—this girl who is essentially his wife already—is pregnant. That is definitely not following the rules. She’s cooked up some story about the Holy Spirit, but really—who knows?

There was a law that told Joseph he had two choices about what to do in this situation. He could publicly break their engagement, ‘out’ Mary; even insist that she be stoned, her whole family shamed. There was just one other option: to call off their engagement privately, to ‘put her away’—which meant sending her back to her family, and probably out of the community, to have her unwanted, inconvenient baby somewhere else, out of sight. That’s what Joseph had decided to do: he would break their engagement quietly, just remove Mary from his life. He could remain a ‘righteous man’ and still treat her with some compassion. It was a reasonable solution, a safe disentanglement, even kind. It made his heart hurt a little, but he’d get over it. His reputation would remain intact. The law would remain unbroken.

And then this angel shows up. This angel says words that probably didn’t make any sense to Joseph at all: ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’; ‘save people from their sins’; Emmanuel. What?

‘Marry her, Joseph,’ this angel says. Take your good, solid, reasonable plan for the future and trade it in for a life you can’t imagine and I can’t tell you much about. I have no assurances to give you. Will people believe Mary’s story? I don’t know. Will this child ever feel like the son you have imagined fathering? Maybe not. Will your life look like the one you have wished for? No.

If Joseph had even an inkling of what this angel was asking him, what his life with Mary and this child would become, I don’t know if he could have done it. He would have predicted that the people he loved most would let him down, disappoint him. He would have understood that he would always be just a supporting actor in the story of his own family. He would have been conscious that he was leaving behind a life with a clear, predictable path to righteousness. He would have known that he was giving himself to a life full of uncertainty; both terrible heartache *and* a future filled with more glorious, mysterious possibility than he had ever imagined.

Isn’t this what every angel asks of us? To marry uncertainty?

I think most of us want to know what’s coming ahead of us, what’s going to happen, how things are going to turn out. Just give me a pattern, we wish to God. Tell me the right thing to do, and I will do it. We are relentlessly addicted to certainty. We crave it; it’s the medicine that meets our fear.

But certainty isn’t actually the calling card of angels. What they leave behind doesn’t really look like this.



They tend to leave behind them something more like this.



They say to us, as a poet has paraphrased what this angel said to Joseph:

*Give yourself without knowing.
Pledge your loyalty to this one you cannot know.
Do not pray to understand:
pray to be present, to be faithful, to be loving
even when you cannot know what will come of it.ⁱ*

Why? Why would a good God want for us a life of uncertainty and ambiguity? Why wouldn't the best life look like one where we are firmly planted, our feet solidly on the ground, the way before us clear and well-lit? Why can't a good life come from a contained faith—a clear set of propositions to believe in, a firmly-grasped set of principles, a simple set of practices?

Because certainty is not faith. In fact, certainty may be the opposite of faith. Faith is turning ourselves over to a living, always-Other God, a God who is profoundly, wildly unpredictable and alive. A God we find not by ordering our lives into a careful righteousness, but by attaching ourselves—marrying—this One who will always surprise us, show up in some way we did not expect, reveal a truth we did not think of on our own.

The truths we take from the Christmas story, the birth of God-with-us, are truths that echo in each of our lives. The God who comes is a God who loves fiercely—not only *the world*, but you. A God who is deeply interested in human life—your life. A God whose best hope for you will not be confined by what you already know or what you're sure is right or by who you already are. This is a God whose love will always unsettle you at the same time it offers

comfort. This is the God who comes to call you into life, and more life, and the life that, with all its uncertainty, is full of possibility, just becoming.

ⁱ From Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, December 18, 2019