

Isaiah 9:2-7
Matthew 1:18-25

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Christmas Courage, "God with Us"

But just when he had resolved to do this [divorce Mary], 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." *Matthew 1:20*

Peter Brueghel, the Elder, the Dutch Master, has a marvelous painting that freezes a moment in time from that account of the night of Jesus' birth, artfully transferring it to a 16th-century Dutch village, which is to say, it could be anywhere. The painting is called "Numbering at Bethlehem." Snow is on the ground. Someone butchers a reluctant pig; another struggles with a load of firewood. Outside an inn an indignant crowd gathers to be counted for tax purposes, and a bored landlord endures the complaints of an exasperated taxpayer. It has all the appearance of an ordinary winter's day, save for a wreath on the door of the inn. Then, just as you are about to avert your gaze from the painting you notice a thoroughly ordinary young woman at the bottom corner of the canvass. She is noticeably pregnant and rides a tired donkey, led by an even tired, stoop shouldered peasant who carries a saw.

Nobody notices them. Mary and Joseph have come to be counted.

The census that took them to Bethlehem from Nazareth, eighty miles through the mountains to the north, uprooted everyone, mingling stranger with wary stranger. One can sense the anxiety on the couple's faces: no shelter, no welcoming kin with arms outstretched Mary on the verge of labor, contractions inflamed by the pounding of the donkey's hooves on rough terrain. No midwife, no flurry of family to bring warm water, clean towels, and extra blankets against the chill. No traditional salt brought by friends to rub on the baby's skin to ward off evil spirits. Just Joseph and Mary with the secret scary knowledge that they are to bring a savior into the world. Poor Joseph—that's not rejoicing news an unmarried man can spread abroad. Truth be told, under biblical law Mary was a prime candidate for stoning.

One thing keeps the silent Joseph at her side: the recollection that an angel came to him in a dream and told him *not to be fearful*, not to dismiss Mary as unworthy. Matthew writes: "while Joseph was pondering this very dismissal an angel came to him" as if while awake, not so much in the dream of sleep as in a reverie, a daydream between reality and imagination. Matthew draws Joseph and us into that shadowland of courageous trusting.

Christmas is founded on trust. And trust is proposed by God precisely at the point where we are most vulnerable, "*Do not be afraid, Joseph.*" "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear," sang sea captain John Newton, knowing that fear can be a benevolent guide luring us away from foolish exploits towards wise. Without a guide, life can be steadily consumed by fears. Writes one author, fear characterizes so many of :

...the habits of life into which we are born...there is [religious] bias, a general view of the world, ideas in regard to [childhood] training, our education, marriage, and occupation in life. . . . anticipations [at the first onset of symptoms] ...that we shall suffer certain children's diseases, diseases of middle life, and of old age; the thought that we shall grow old, lose our faculties, and again become childlike; while crowning all of this is the fear of death. [There are] fears associated with certain articles of food.... the fear of accident, the possibility of calamity, the loss of property, the chance of robbery, of fire ...the outbreak of war. [Neither is it] sufficient to fear for ourselves. When a friend is taken ill we...fear the worst and apprehend death. [And] if we meet with sorrow, sympathy means [literally] to enter in and increase the suffering.

This astonishingly contemporary piece was written by H.W. Dresser in his book, *Voices of Freedom*, in 1899!

The Christmas message from the angel in Matthew to a perfectly mute Joseph (Joseph never utters a word in Matthew) deftly reminds us that God knows the heart without our speaking it. So the first words from the angel are, “Don’t be afraid.” In the details Luke’s story is very different from Matthew’s: Jesus is there born in a cattle enclosure, traditionally a barn or cave, in Matthew he’s born in a house. Only in Matthew do we find rich wise men, only in Luke poor shepherds. In Luke there’s no slaughter of the infants by Herod or escape into Egypt, instead Jesus’ family return straight to Nazareth. No matter, because the announcement is the same, albeit to Mary alone in Luke: the child to be born will be the savior of his people. And when perplexity and anxiety rush upon her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Likewise the first words to terrified shepherds in that halogen-like epiphany of angels in the dead of night is, “Do not be afraid....”

Fear may be the most instinctive human reaction. Which is why God’s first and enduring word to us is it’s antidote; “Do not fear. I give you good reason not to fear.” *I am with you*. Now, God says, open the gift and take on courage by trusting me. Someone has spoken of courage as the basic virtue, if one does not have it, all the other virtues one has will not stand up under testing. Even wisdom is as lifeless as the ink on a page if it does not issue in courageous action.

Here’s an example of why we need not fear, an example of what happens when we take courage by trusting. It’s from a book called *Strength to Love*.

One of the most dedicated participants in the [civil rights] bus protests in Montgomery, Alabama, was an elderly negro whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement. After having walked for several weeks, she was asked if she were tired. With ungrammatical profundity she answered, “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.”

On a particular Monday morning after a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken. At the end of the meeting Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, “Come here, son.” I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. “Something is wrong with you,” she said. “You didn’t talk strong tonight.”

Seeking further to disguise my fears, I said, “O, no, Mother Pollard, Nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.”

But her insight was discerning. “Now you can’t fool me,” she said, “I knows something is wrong. . . .” Before I could respond she looked directly into my eyes and said, “I don told you we is with you all the way.” Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, “But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.” As she spoke these consoling words, everything in me quivered and quickened with the pulsing tremor of raw energy.

Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known few quiet days.... But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul. “God’s gonna take care of you.

That was Martin Luther King in 1963.

Hearing the messenger (angel/Mother Pollard) is one thing. Believing what God promises in Jesus is another thing. Yet even belief on its own can be a rather docile, impotent thing. *Trusting* God, the God whose “grace my fears relieved,” to finish Newton’s line, is transformational!

The genius of this story, none the less, is in its messenger. not the shimmering angels against a velvet night, or the silent Joseph’s fortitude in faithfulness, nor the fear-relieved Mary, nor obedient shepherd, or journey wearied wise men—but the child born that night. The one who cannot talk, yet speaks through the story with an eloquence beyond psalmist or Shakespeare about the possibilities of your life and mine. This infant speaks of the benevolent recklessness of our God, who risks investing God’s most intimate self in one so fallible as a baby, subject to every little germ in the air, every accident of common life, every rebuff of human beings, like the stone faced Michael in *Godfather 2* shutting the door of the house on a grief stricken Kay, severing her from her children. In Barbara Brown Taylor’s lovely image of the angels in heaven pleading with

God not to risk everything that's holy in one so human and therefore fallible, God persists and the angels ultimately capitulate to something they cannot yet comprehend, until Jesus shows them in his time.

A baby speaks of unadulterated purity, a life born in innocence as yet unsullied by acts of self-preservation, acts that each of us must contend with. These are the traits that Jesus melded from within into the fabric of his daily life.

A baby speaks of deepest mystery of God, a little glistening living thing at birth, who not long ago had no corporeal existence. Jesus, with all his lifelong courage, knowing that God was with him inseparably, as with us, inseparably. Isn't that his name, "*God-with-Us*."

Mary courageously kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Jesus is born in the image of God, just as we are. And we should, then, act as God's agents in lives of justice and mercy—or what's it all for?

Courage is at the heart of this child. That is what the word means, "From the heart." It is his nature to trust God in all things. It is ours—don't suppress it. Jesus is born in the image of God, just as we are. And we should, then, act with courage, supported by faith in God-with-us, as God's agents of justice and mercy—or what's it all for?

When we sing the Gloria Patri each week, we sing words based on the very words that Christian martyrs sang in their marching-to-death-song. Like their Savior they understood unto death and beyond that *God was inseparably with us*.

Amen.