

LOVE
By Rev. Ridgley Beckett
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Matthew 1:18-25

As the calendar year ends, I've been thinking a lot about what I did this year, what I'm proud of, what I accomplished, what I learned about myself, my call, God. One thing I am proud of is that this year I prioritized the very thing that is balm to my soul and fills my cup time after time—camping and spending time outside. I'm sure none of you are surprised by this. I was able to go camping 9 out of the 12 months in 2025 and I can say that without a doubt, it was worth it.

My love for camping started in COVID mostly, but it wasn't until 2023 that I started camping alone. At first it was a bit scary, but I took many precautions to ensure that I would be safe. Coyotes can really thwart that understanding in the middle of the night when you hear them yapping. I had to do a lot of work to reminding myself that I was safe even when my brain wanted to think of all the reasons why that plan was flawed.

I remind myself again and again: (slowly)

Darkness is not dangerous. Silence is not dangerous. I am okay.

The animals are not going to attack my tent and eat me simply because I am here.

One of the cool things I've noticed about camping alone is that many people do it! I've met a surprising number of single women who love to go camping and are brave enough to do it. It's inspiring and amazing. One of the things I love most is how we look out for each other, even though we don't know who the other person is at all. It's a chance to meet someone, learn their story, then go on your way.

Back in June I took a quick getaway to Shenandoah National Park to recoup after the horse show fundraiser. I drove as early as I could down to Loft Mountain Campground in the southern part of the park to get the best of the first come, first serve campsites I had my eye on online. At the top of a mountain, I found THE BEST campsite, in the woods along the mountainside. It was on a rock cliff right above the Appalachian Trail, and it was home to the best sunset view on the campground.

As I was pitching my tent the first day, I kept stopping to take in the setting orange sun as it illuminated the layers upon layers of blue ridge mountains that I could see FROM MY TENT.

I couldn't believe this was where I would spend my week. My dog Seamus and I spent a wonderful first day in the park hiking over 8 miles through groves and groves of mountain laurel and waterfalls. That night, I came home to my site to discover I had a neighbor. She was from Richmond, a teacher meeting her son for there Spring Break—this, too, was her favorite spot in the park.

That night she and I chatted through the trees as we made our dinners. Eventually her son arrived and Seamus and I retreated to my tent for the night to read. I popped in my trusty

earplugs and pulled my eyemask down, and drifted into a peaceful slumber after a very active day. An hour later I awoke to “BEAR! THERE’S A BEAR! EVERYONE MAKE NOISE THERE’S A BEAR!” The entire campground erupted on this hillside banging pans clapping and screaming at the top of their lungs. My neighbor had turned around to see a bear within 10 feet of her. When we were all screaming the bear got up on his hind legs scratched the tree and sulked off staring her straight in the eyes the whole time. Minutes later we could hear a dog barking further down the AT on our campground, clanging pans, yelling once more. The bear found his way to more mountainside campsites, this time entering the site, welcoming himself to their hot dogs and finishing by *marking his territory* on their tent.

I got out of my tent and spoke with my neighbor. I asked her 7,000 questions about bear safety. She helped me ensure there was nothing that could attract the bear to my tent or site, and I somehow went back to bed. Another hour passed and I awoke to “Ridgley, it’s Susan, your neighbor. I spoke with the campground host and this bear broke into someone’s car last night. He seems more aggressive than most bears I’ve seen, so I’m sleeping in my car, and I think you should too”

Groggy, I mumbled the words “Thanks for waking me up and letting me know.” I sighed, shook Seamus awake (might I remind you he slept through ALL of this). I grabbed everything I needed to sleep, drove to the other side of the campground, climbed into my Subaru and tried to go to sleep. Except all I could think about was that this bear broke into a car last night to get to food, and here I am in the car with all kinds of things that smell. My mind went to the races and all of the worst possible scenarios became vivid dreams. There was no assurance that night, other than that a stranger cared about me camping alone and made sure I was safe.

The next day the park let me move to another campground and eventually the aggressive yogi bear was trapped. The rest of my week was lovely, but boy was this a memory. It seems easier now to tell the story, but in the moment I was terrified. It truly tested my ability to sit in my fear, to try to move through it, and to prove to myself that my fears of what could happen were actually worse than what was happening. It also tested my hope in humanity. All of us were strangers, and we were all taking care of each other.

Sometimes what we imagine or dream about happening is the more scary thing. Not what’s actually happening right in front of us. Fight, Flight or Freeze—our bodies were literally made for scenarios like being chased by a bear! The hormones Adrenaline and Cortisol release, we have sudden bursts of energy, our digestion slows, and the reasoning part of our brains-the prefrontal cortex- goes offline. The limbic system-the emotional part of our brains is running the show and boy is it really good at protecting you. This is helpful when a bear comes and visits your campsite.

But when it’s a Sunday night and you’re sitting and watching the news, or you’re having a hard conversation with a loved one who you disagree with or heading into your review at work—your body doesn’t know the difference. You start to get antsy, your cortisol soars, your palms get sweaty, your speech quickens. The prefrontal cortex—the part that can

reason and help you see the full picture—goes offline and the limbic system is off to the races.

The thing is--our bodies don't really care whether the threat is a bear outside the tent or a future we can't control. Fear collapses time. It pulls the future's worst possibilities into right now.

Which makes me think Joseph in our scripture reading today understood fear in a way that feels very familiar.

Last week Patrick preached from Luke about the angel visiting Mary and her response is "Here I am" with our beloved Mary's Magnificat that follows. What courage Mary displayed.

Matthew gives us a different doorway into courage. Matthew gives us Joseph's courage lived quietly. And for those of us who don't find brave words easily — Matthew's telling matters.

Matthew's version of the birth narrative starts with the genealogy of Jesus, showing his readers that for Jesus to be a descendant of David, his lineage depends on *Joseph* being Jesus' father. Matthew dives right in in verse 18—Joseph and Mary are almost married—and then—a wrench gets thrown in and things go awry. Mary is pregnant. She says it is from God.

She could be shunned by society, have no way of providing for herself, who knows if her father would take her back, she could even be stoned to death as was a common punishment those days to women accused of adultery. This 'great good news' from the angel is terrifying and is threatening her very existence. "Here I am" isn't Joseph's first response.

Fight, flight or freeze. There is no telling the anxious thoughts that ran through his mind when he discovered this news. It is likely he feared for Mary and her situation, he feared for his social standing and reputation, this was not the plan. I'd imagine as Joseph was getting into bed that night all he could think about was how he had taken every step he was supposed to—and still found himself in an impossible situation. He didn't expect life to turn out like this.

Scripture tells us that he comes to the best conclusion he could—he would dismiss Mary quietly, trying to lessen the blow of her social ridicule and free him up from the burden. Joseph was planning to walk away. But God's work relies not just on the bearer of God, but Joseph too. As he drifts off to sleep, Joseph has a dream—this dream isn't one that was full of all the worst case scenarios of what could happen—this dream was from God—

A dream of what could be is all it takes to change everything.

An angel visits Joseph in the dream and explains that the child Mary carries is more than a child. He is Emmanuel, "God with us." The uncertainties of Mary and Joseph's future

remain, but the promise is that they are not alone in them. God is sending into the world a savior. The child will be a sign to the world that God is near.

The angel tells Joseph that he must take Mary to be his wife and he was to be the father of that child, to care for him, to raise him—that he should name the child Jesus. This dream foretells what work God is unfolding in a fearful world. When all Joseph could think of was bad, God opened his eyes to see what could be—and Joseph was obedient.

Joseph awakes from this dream and rather than dismissing Mary, he moves toward her and extends the hand of compassion and protection. Joseph could have used his privilege to protect himself from this whole ordeal but instead he takes a risk and uses his privilege to stand in solidarity with a vulnerable pregnant unwed teenager.

Joseph moves through his fears and finds connection with Mary and in doing so their mutuality weathers the storm together. You and me becomes we and together fear becomes courage despite the fear.

There is no song of Joseph recorded in the Gospels. No declaration of faith or clear statement of belief. Joseph simply *does* as he was told. For him, belief is action.

Quietly, Joseph cared for Mary.

Quietly, he raised the child and named him Jesus.

Quietly, he believed and acted.¹

He does not fix everything, he does not erase the risk, but he chooses to share it.

In that moment, Joseph's story stops being ancient history and starts sounding a lot like our own. And that movement — from self-protection to shared risk — is where love begins to take flesh.

Joseph's obedience shows us that righteousness looks a lot like love--urging us to see every person as a child of God—and to welcome them into our hearts and homes.²

This is where God's love is born again and again. When we don't run from fear of the other and listen to the narrative our anxiety tells us—when we move through our fear knowing

¹ Joseph's silent submission to Mary's God-given calling is real biblical manhood," by Michael Frost. Premier Christianity: The UK's leading Christian magazine. December 20, 2022. premierchristianity.com/opinion/josephs-silent-submission-to-marys-god-given-calling-is-real-biblical-manhood/14578.article

² Rev. Dr. Boyoung Lee, Commentary. Sanctified Art's What do you Fear Sermon Planning Guide.

that it won't go away, but that together we can find courage in the face of fear. To dream God's dream of hope peace love and joy in a world that begs us to believe otherwise.

This week we aren't asked to fix the world, we are asked to take each other's hands and walk forward into it—together.

So often our fears divide us from one another, we isolate ourselves and tell ourselves stories. Love invites us to see God's dream for our communities, for a mutuality with one another. Dreams of a world filled with love not polarization. Author Bell Hooks writes in her book "All about Love" that "fear keeps us from trusting in love." 1 John 4:18 calls us to resist fear with love: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear"

When we choose to love we choose to love against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other."

"There are people in our communities today who, like Mary, carry something sacred and heavy, something that puts them at risk—their identity, their truth, their calling, or their hope.

And there are others, like Joseph, who hold more security, more safety, more voice.

Advent invites us not simply to "be not afraid" but to act with love in the midst of fear. Not to fix everything, but to show up with courage and reach out. This love is grounded in risk, humility and faith—it is what Isaiah evokes in 41:6,10)"³

What Joseph shows us is not how to stop being afraid, but how to live faithfully while fear is still present. The risks do not disappear when he wakes from his dream. The future remains uncertain. And yet, something shifts. Instead of pulling away, Joseph chooses to draw nearer. He chooses to let his life be shaped by love rather than by fear, even when love asks something costly of him.

This is where God's love is made manifest--not in moments of certainty or confidence, but in quiet decisions to stay connected. To remain tender in a world that teaches us to harden. To protect one another when retreat would feel easier. Joseph's righteousness does not look loud or heroic. It looks like buying diapers and baby wipes for a woman who has found herself in an impossible situation, but grateful for the ministry of Home of the Sparrow. It looks like staying after church to make a simple PB&J for a person to have dinner one night. It looks like buying a Christmas gift for a child in foster care. It looks like paring down your clothes so someone who is unhoused can have a warm jacket and shoes for the winter. It looks like sacrificing a little sleep to open a cold shelter when the temperatures drop into the 20s. It looks like compassion practiced in the ordinary, like faithfulness expressed through care, like love taking root in the midst of vulnerability.

³ "Love is the only sane response in a time of fear," by Laura Kirk. SOJOURNERS. February 13, 2025. sojo.net/articles/opinion/love-only-sane-response-time-fear

Perhaps this is how hope finds its way into our lives as well. Not all at once, and not in spite of fear, but through the presence of others who refuse to leave us alone in it. Hope grows when we allow ourselves to be held by community, and when we, in turn, choose to hold others with gentleness and courage.

This Advent, our series does not ask us to pretend the world is less frightening than it is. It asks us to notice where love is already stirring within it. As we light the candle of love this morning, we remember that hope is not something we muster on our own. It is a dream God gives us of a better world—when we choose compassion over distance, connection over fear, and trust that Emmanuel is already present, quietly and faithfully, in our midst.