

I

Sometimes, things don't turn out exactly like you expected. For example, this year, my wife Amy and I decided to upgrade the lights on our Christmas tree. Our old strings of lights were several years old, and there were many burnt out bulbs, so off to the store I went.

And standing in the store, I noticed that the newest Christmas light technology called LED bulbs were about the same price as the old kind we used to have, and they use much less electricity and produce much less heat. However, I did not know that they also produce much MORE light.

And so if you happen to drop by our house, you might want to put on sunblock if you're going to sit by our Christmas tree. Let's just say that at the Baer house this December, we are making the season BRIGHT.

Sometimes, things don't turn out exactly the way we envisioned that they would. And sometimes, it's something trivial, like crazy bright Christmas lights, but sometimes it's about something far more serious.

Take for example the case of my best buddy. We met in middle school, and we were best man in each other's weddings. Just a few months ago, he was anticipating a joyful holiday season with his wife and two teenage children. But a routine annual physical just before Thanksgiving lead to a flag for more tests, and this past Thursday, he underwent colon cancer surgery. The surgery went well, but the road before him in the New Year looks nothing like

he thought it would just a few months ago.

II

Sometimes, reality looks nothing like our expectations. Sometimes, things don't turn out exactly the way we envisioned that they would. Sometimes, it seems like life turns on a dime, and the future is anything but certain, and we are gripped by fear.

And for us, as people of faith, when reality doesn't match up with our expectations, when things don't turn out like we thought they would, when we become gripped by fear and filled with anxiety, it makes us wonder, where is God in all of this?

III

Our story today involves a man who had expectations – a picture in his mind about how things were going to go, and then life happened, and his plans were erased like a blackboard and had to be rebuilt from scratch.

In most English bibles, the sub headline for the story we're about to hear reads, "The Birth of Jesus the Messiah." But if you're looking for an inn and a manger and some shepherds, you'll have to come back Saturday night when we read Luke's from Luke's gospel.

Beginning today and through the rest of this winter and spring, we'll be reading through the Gospel According to Matthew. And in his telling of the story of the birth of Jesus, Matthew focuses our attention on a man by the name of Joseph. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Matthew 1:18-25.

*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.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Joseph had expectations of what life was going to be like. In those days and in that culture, an engagement was not usually a story where boy meets girl, they fall in love, he buys a ring, pops the question, and they start planning their dream wedding.

In those days and in that culture, an engagement a contractual arrangement between two families, in which family status and economics played a key role. So when it came to the

engagement of Joseph and Mary, it was far more than a private matter between two consenting adults. Their engagement was a public matter, between two families, made in view of their entire community.

Joseph had expectations and plans. And then, Matthew tells us that before they lived together, i.e. before their marriage was solemnized and consummated, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Again, in those days and in that culture an unexpected pregnancy was not a private matter, but a public one, and Joseph would have been within his rights to break off the engagement. Not only that, but ancient law said that Joseph would have been within his rights to have Mary executed by stoning.

We can only speculate about Joseph's reaction was when he learned about Mary's unexpected pregnancy. Was he hurt? Was he confused? Was he angry? Maybe some combination of all three, but almost certainly he was grieved, for he knew that no matter what, his future would not look like he had envisioned it.

But Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. He decided he wouldn't kick up a fuss or add to what was sure to be Mary's public embarrassment. He would just let her go quietly and then try to pick up the pieces from there.

Grief affects people in many different ways. But one thing that seems to me to be universal about grief is that it causes one to be so very, very tired. And

so Joseph, his heart soaked in grief, fell into a deep, deep sleep.

And sometime during the night, perhaps at a point when the dark was at its deepest, perhaps at a point where Joseph's grief was at its heaviest, a voice called out:

Joseph, son of David.

Joseph, son of David. Matthew begins his gospel account with a genealogy of Jesus. According to Matthew David was Joseph's 13<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather on his father's side. King David, you may recall, is regarded in ancient Israel's memory as the greatest of all the kings. It was David who united the 12 tribes into one unified nation. It was David who brought the ark of the covenant into the city of Jerusalem. It was David who was said to be a man after God's own heart. David was not without sin, but God promised David that David's descendant would rule over Israel forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Joseph, son of David, the messenger from God calls out into his grief-stricken darkness. Joseph, son of David, remember who and whose you are. Joseph, son of David, remember that you belong to a chosen people a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

And then the angel gives the most common four-word imperative phrase in scripture. This four-word imperative appears in the bible over and over and over again, from Genesis to Revelation and back again.

Do not be afraid.

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.

Into the darkest part of the night, into the deepest part of the grief, the voice of God speaks.

Do. Not. Be. Afraid.

#### IV

But here's the truth, my friend, I have a long list of things about which I am afraid. And I suspect that you do, too. Time would not permit you and I to sit down and make a list together of all of the things about which we are fearful.

I wonder if we're both afraid that our hopes for ourselves and those whom we love will not be realized. I wonder if we're both afraid that the plans that we have will get disrupted or detoured or outright destroyed by events beyond our control.

It's OK to admit that you're afraid, my friend. Joseph was afraid. Mary was afraid. The shepherds were terrified, Luke tells us. Feeling afraid is not a sign that we're unfaithful or cowards. Fear is a natural part of the human experience..

But the God whom we worship and serve, the God whose incarnation we mark this season, is known as Emmanuel, which means God is with us. And for us, as people of faith, that's what this season is really all about. The incarnation that we mark this season is our claim that God is not far off in the heavens, removed from our everyday lives, our everyday hopes and fears. No,

the faith claim that we Christians make is that God is called Emmanuel, God is with us.

Nearly 500 years ago, during a time of great political and economic turmoil, during a time of great chaos and confusion, during a time when much of the world was still reeling from the after effects of a deadly pandemic, some followers of Jesus living near the town of Heidelberg, Germany, decided to write a catechism, a series of theological questions and answers, in hopes that it would provide some level of comfort and clarity for Christians who were living through a season of chaos. They wrote 129 questions and answers in their catechism, and the first one was this:

What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

And they answered it this way.

That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

It's not lost on me that we celebrated the sacrament of baptism today. When we baptize, we declare that we are not our own. Baby Peter does not ultimately belong to Margaret and Ben or the Davis family. He does not ultimately belong to First Presbyterian Church of Athens. He does not ultimately belong even to himself. He is not his own, but he belongs, body and soul, in life and in death, to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

And so do you, my friend.

The promise of baptism is that in the darkest part of the night, God is with you.

The promise of baptism is that in the deepest part of the grief, God is with you.

So do not be afraid, my friend. Remember who and whose you are. And know that when your plans get disrupted or detoured or outright destroyed, even then, God is with you.

## V

There is much chaos and confusion and pain in our world today. The hopes and fears of all the years are ever on our minds. But the angel calls to us, as heirs of the covenant through our baptism in Jesus Christ, do not be afraid! Remember who and whose you are! You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

This child whose birth we mark this season is Jesus, and he will save his people from their sins.

And because of his life, because of his ministry, because of his death and resurrection, there is no sin of ours that is beyond God's forgiving. There is no hurt of ours that is beyond God's healing. There is no death of ours that is beyond God's resurrecting, because in life and in death, we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us."