

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
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Cruciform Signs and Wonders

Beloved in Christ, I offer you these words in the name of the one true, living, and liberating God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scared, alone, angry, knocked off balance, betrayed.

I imagine those were some of the things Joseph was feeling in his gut. During those minutes, hours, days he must have spent reeling. After finding out the news about Mary and before the dream. And maybe after the dream too. Still trying to make sense of all this. What in the world is going on? What is this? Why me? Why--us?

There is nothing neat and tidy about any of this. Yet, we hear the words of the angel echo across time and space, now words for you and me. Do not be afraid. Really? Joseph might have muttered under his breath.

An extra canonical text from the second century gives us a glimpse into what might have Joseph's very real human reaction. "When Joseph sees Mary's swollen belly, he throws himself on the ground, strikes his own face, and cries bitterly. He wonders long and hard how to respond, and asks Mary why she has betrayed both him and God so cruelly."

What do you feel in your gut? In your heart? In the seat of your being? What is going on underneath your thoughts?

It was in seminary where, for what felt like the first time, people I trusted invited me into a space of vulnerability. Lovingly and insistently creating space for me to share experiences in my life that the world tells us we have to suppress and keep to ourselves. Struggles, challenges, and failures especially. Naming them. And then reflecting on those experiences and how they shaped me and continue to make me who I am. How those experiences make me *feel*. Angry, alone, loved, you fill in the blank. Whether it was the love I felt from my grandma who always told me I was special or the weird shame a relative of mine felt being laid off from his union job and never getting it back and how it affected all of us. You know how shame works.

I learned that these conversations give us courage. Power. And insight into the things that we are so passionate about or afraid of, and the animating forces behind them. They make us more fully human.

Or as the Apostle Paul would say, they show us why it is true that God's power is made perfect in *our* weakness.

Risk and hope and faith swirl around those kinds of conversations. There is nothing neat and tidy about any of this no matter how hard we try to project it out that way. Or how much we are tempted to perform.

There is certainly nothing neat and tidy about this 4th Sunday of Advent. Sure, by the end of this perichope there is a bit of resolution and Joseph consents and trusts the word of the angel, but we tend to move on so quickly.

And as Priest Debbie Thomas puts it: "We make a grave mistake, when we sanitize Joseph's consent. We assume that his acceptance of God's plan came easily, when we hold ourselves at arm's length from his humiliation and doubt. In fact, what Joseph's pain shows me is that God's favor is not the shiny, anodyne thing I'd like to believe it is. In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God led a "righteous" man with an impeccable reputation into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son. It required Joseph — a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy — to choose what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, inexplicable."

We might relate. We know about the messiness of life, to put it mildly. How it simply materializes and shows up unannounced. We know our own pain and the pain of the world just outside those doors. The pain we will hold space for at the Longest Night service this Wednesday. We also are familiar with sin and brokenness and the new ways it always seems to rear its ugly head. Another year home alone on Christmas, another meal with an empty chair, another holiday hijacked by addiction, situations and people we wish we could save, but alas there is nothing we can do but cry out *Lord have mercy*. The ancient cry of those with nothing left to say.

Or "stir up your power Oh Christ and come." As Dorothy Bass says "yearning out of the depths of history and into the promises beyond history, and out of the depths of our own lives towards the fulfillment of our deepest longing."

Death haunts us around every corner and sin stalks. Whether it is our own pride that attempts to swallow us whole or the systems that prop up so much destruction and only seem to get more powerful every turn of the calendar year.

We all feel scared, alone, angry, knocked off balance, betrayed in one way or another.

Yet the angel still is whispering to you and me: Do not be afraid.

How could these words ever be anything but a pious platitude. Like hoping for some daylight or shred of sunshine days before the winter solstice?

Well, we let this story of risk and hope and faith unfold a bit. Follow this sign-- promised in Isaiah a little further. This child as he grows. A sign nothing less than God's own self wrapped in your vulnerable flesh and mine. Divinity disguised in weakness. Following him to the limits of our lives. To the cross. Despised, rejected, ashamed.

Scared, alone, knocked off balance, betrayed. Emotions well known on that hill.

He will die a cursed one's death. All the while swallowing up death itself. Three days later he will rise again before the sun.

A kind of exclamation point on the angel's explanation of emmanuel: God *is* with us. Now. Whatever now holds and beyond.

This God of the cross and empty tomb is the one who keeps promises and lives God's name. Through our faith--itself a gift from the God of the impossible, we hear, this Christ has come and is here today. Embracing you in his wounded and risen hands. Enveloping you and all that you carry in his tender grasp. And he will not lose you. Forgiving you of your sin. And meeting you at the end of your hope. When the lights have gone out. And the future is shrouded in fog. He gives his own life for you. Body and blood- food and drink. His presence-- playing in ten thousand places as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds. As Luther might continue, Especially in places that make the world shutter in horror. God is there and will not let this be the end.

When he comes, as he so often does when our fears become disorienting, he proclaims from the future: *Do not be afraid.*

And, Christ will come again, again and again amid our fears and joys and very human lives. Until finally in the fullness of time we will experience just how all-encompassing that love of Emmanuel really is in our own bodies.

Baptized into this wellspring of love, we live this kind of risky hope with a power that comes only by dying and rising, dying and rising.

You and I, living signs of that loves sacrificial, outward facing, lavishness with cruciform coordinates. Loving ourselves into a vulnerability that only the Spirit-- poured out on you can inspire.

And, we take the risk of relationship. One tiptoe at a time. Soon you will find yourself being and receiving Christ in ways and people that leave you in awe. Until in that cross shaped wisdom from on high *it will all belong*. And our prayers will be transformed into eternal praise.

So we plead with the saints, with our voices, and with all creation: *Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel*. And he does and he will.

Look at the signs. +

In the name of Jesus.