

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A, 2022

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Grief comes before joy.

In today's story... and in so much of life.

So... our reading today tells the story of Christmas, but it's not the story we know and love. There is no census demanding a young couple go to Bethlehem. No stable because the inn was too full. No shepherds keeping their flocks by night. No heavenly host singing glory to God in the highest.

No, that's all from the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel we read on Christmas Eve. This is Matthew's version. It's short, though not that sweet, telling the Christmas story entirely from the point of view of Joseph, not Mary.

And the story Matthew tells is one of surprise, disappointment, and grief. At least at first.

Joseph and Mary, you see, were engaged when it becomes apparent that Mary is already pregnant – and not by Joseph – and so he plans on breaking off their engagement. But “engagement” doesn't really cut it as a translation. Breaking off an engagement is painful, but no lawyers are involved. In first-century Jewish custom, you see, there were two steps involved in a typical marriage. The first is what is here translated as engagement, but has been translated in other versions of the Bible as betrothed, espoused, and pledged to marry. It essentially means the establishment of a marriage contract, usually arranged by the parents, and is a legal arrangement broken only by divorce. Stage two is celebrated by a marriage feast, held up to a year later, after which the couple moves in with each other and begins their life together.

Joseph and Mary are in between these two stages. They have been contractually bound to each other, but may or may not yet know each other very well. They haven't yet lived together, and definitely haven't had the opportunity to conceive a child together. And so when Joseph discovers Mary pregnant, he is likely shocked and disappointed, perhaps angered and without a doubt broken-hearted. But rather than expose her to public shame – and perhaps public shunning or punishment – Joseph resolves to divorce Mary quietly, pick up the broken pieces of his life, and try to move on. That all changes after a visit from the angel Gabriel, who tells Joseph that this child is from God and that he should take Mary as his wife as planned. And we'll get to that part of the story in a moment. But, first, just now, let's linger just a little longer with Joseph's grief.

Because it *is* grief he feels. This is not what he had hoped for. Not what he had dreamed of or planned for or anticipated. And it's not fair. He has done everything right. Worked hard,

planned for their life together. He had done his part. And everything changes with the sudden and unwelcome news of Mary's unexpected and inexplicable pregnancy. In that brief moment, Joseph loses everything he had hoped for, planned for, and dreamed of.

Sound at all familiar? I've come to think of 2020 and 2021, as the years of bitter disappointments and broken dreams. High school and college graduations without hoopla or fanfare. Weddings planned with hundreds of guests limited to only a few family members. Sports seasons cut short or eliminated, unemployment reaching depression-era rates. Not seeing loved ones for months. Family gatherings and celebrations deferred indefinitely. Dropping off a parent or spouse at the hospital to go in alone. A funeral with only those closest to the deceased in attendance. Nursing home residents isolated from their families. Worship – even and especially our beloved Christmas Eve worship – online rather than in person. And, of course, so much of even all that pales in comparison with loss of nearly 300,000 lives in this country alone and more than a million and a half worldwide... and counting.

So much loss... and so much grief. So much, in fact, that we at times don't even know we're grieving. It's what psychologists sometimes call "ambiguous loss" – loss that doesn't make sense and has no clear beginning or end, loss that provides few answers and is as unexpected and inexplicable as it is unfair. It's the kind of loss that feels omnipresent but at the same time is hard to name. And so the grief it causes sneaks up on us, surprises us perhaps while driving and hearing a beloved Christmas carol, or when suddenly overcome by the blues while folding laundry or fixing the kitchen sink or putting up the Christmas tree. It's that feeling that you're doing pretty well with all the usual and unusual challenges... until suddenly you're not and all at once feel overwhelmed and you don't know why.

And there are about only two things you can do in this situation. The first is to name it. Grief isn't something to be ashamed of or denied. In fact, the more you try to do that the more power it has over you. You have – we have – good reason for grief. This has been a year of disappointments small and large and so, so many broken dreams. Naming that grief helps contain it, define it, to pull it out of the shadows to a place where you can see it as real... but perhaps not quite as overwhelming as it once seemed.

And the second thing we can do is to be prepared for joy once again. Or if not prepared, at least open. Open to the possibility that life, though difficult, hasn't ended, that loss and grief will not have the last word, that joy and happiness and courage aren't yet exhausted.

These two things – grieving and be open to joy – are just what this short, not that sweet, and probably unfamiliar Christmas story is about. Joseph grieves as he makes his plans to end his engagement to Mary quietly, and then he is surprised by joy. An angel appears and greets him with the signature line of Scripture signaling good news and revealing that hope is not yet lost: "do not be afraid." Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Do not be afraid to raise this son as your own. Do not be afraid of the future. Do not be afraid to make

plans again and dream and hope again. For God is with you. In fact, the name angel commands Joseph to give his son is “Jesus,” which means “God will save,” and then the angel tells Joseph that this baby conceived by the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit is Emmanuel, the promise that God is with us... always.

Now, truth be told, we don’t know if Joseph was reluctant in his obedience or thrilled to be a part of God’s plan. All we know is that he consents, does all that the angel commands, and plays an important part in the greatest story ever told. All he does, that is, is to name his grief and then be open to joy and possibility once more.

Grief comes before joy. In this story, and in so much of our lives. But the joy, hope, and possibility that comes is, in the end, more powerful even than the very real grief we name, because that joy is born of love. God’s love for each of us. In fact, the whole Christmas story tells not simply just how much God loves us but just how far God was willing to go so that we would hear, understand, and believe that good news.

And so, one last, short Christmas story, perhaps also unfamiliar, or perhaps one you’ve heard before as it was told years ago by that consummate story teller and radio personality Paul Harvey. It’s a story of a farmer who never went to church, even though his wife did regularly. One cold and blustery Christmas Eve, after his wife had again pleaded with him to no avail to come with her to church, he was reading comfortably by the fire when he heard a thudding against the windows of their house. He looked out and saw that sparrows, trying to get out of the cold harsh wind, and attracted by the light and heat inside, were crashing into the windows of the house. He covered the windows, but that didn’t work, so he decided to put on his coat, gloves and hat and go out and open his barn doors wide so the birds could find sanctuary there. But they wouldn’t come in. He put the lights on, but they didn’t come. He spread a trail of cracker crumbs, but they wouldn’t follow. He tried to shoo them in, but that only frightened them more. “If only,” he thought, “If only I could become a sparrow for a little while, I could lead them into the barn to safety.” And in that moment, he realized what Christmas is all about: God’s intention, determination, and action to do anything to make sure we know we are loved and to bring us to safety.

The grief we feel is real. But so also the joy, for it is borne of God’s love. So, grieve, and then be open. Give voice to your loss, and then hear God’s promise to be with you. Name your fear, and then hear the angelic message of courage. Because the birth of Jesus doesn’t mean that there is no more loss or grief or fear, just that these things do not have the last word. And so, as Gabriel said so long ago to Joseph, let me now say the same to you, “Do not fear. For God is with you. Now... and always.” Blessed Christmas!