

Isaiah 35:1-10 ~ Matthew 1:18-25
*From Generation to Generation...We Can Choose a Better Way*ⁱ
 Third Sunday of Advent ~ December 11, 2022 ~ Gaudete Sunday
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson

If you think about Joseph at all, what comes to mind is likely the silent, resolute figure standing next to Mary in the plastic Nativity scenes that proliferate on lawns, and sometimes larger than life blow-up figures this time of year. What do we really know about him? In Matthew and Mark, we are told that Joseph was a carpenter. Honestly, our intel on Joseph is scant. But if we think of him at all, we think of Joseph as a righteous, ethical, Torah-abiding, humble guy.

We may not realize that Joseph bursts onto the scene in Matthew 1 with quite a pedigree. Matthew went to great lengths (and you got to hear me read it two weeks ago) to trace Joseph's ancestors all the way back to Father Abraham. Unlike Mary, the 12–13-year-old unknown, unpedigreed village girl to whom he was betrothed, Joseph was a man of power and privilege within his community. Not only because he was a man in a patriarchal culture, but also because he was a descendant of royalty through King David. Whenever you read "son of David" or about someone being of the "House of David" in the Bible, you should cue a drum roll and trumpet fanfare in your mind.

Today, we get to think about Joseph. Today, we get to learn from Joseph. A man who went to bed one night, thinking he had a plan. Let's call it "Plan A." This is Matthew's story of how the birth of Jesus took place. Spoiler alert: It was not Joseph's "Plan A."

Sermon

I guess it was Woody Allen who gave us the line, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans." Of course, it was God who made Sarah laugh when she overheard the ridiculous news that she, in her old age would conceive and give birth to a child, for the first time in her long life with Abraham. It was in Mamre, in the heat of the day, that God appeared in the form of three men to tell Abraham and Sarah, that her "Plan A" to provide Abraham with an heir, her "workaround" with Hagar's baby, was about to be upended by her extraordinary birth of Isaac. When the angel appeared to Joseph in the dark of the night in a dream, his message about the birth of Jesus was not the first impossible birth in our faith story. In fact, our Bible lights up with seemingly impossible births beginning with Isaac, right on through to Jesus' birth. True to their ancestors before them, Mary and Joseph were surprised, shocked. Unlike Sarah, no one is laughing at this news. The sudden shift from "Plan A" tested their moxie and their faith.

Today is our day to rejoice in Joseph's choice to trust God and go with God's plan, not his. God's Plan, I will call "Plan B." "B" for God's "Better Way." "B" for God's "breakthrough," "B" for God's grace that gives us a chance to "Begin Again." Right in the middle of our fears: God is there. In our deep darkness, even when we can't really feel it. As Isaiah proclaimed to the exiled, displaced captives in Babylon, "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.” (Isaiah 35:4) Yup, just when we think all hope is lost. Just when we have no idea what to do next because we are in so deep. God is there, and it is God who brings us unexpected joy that can come only as we heal, inch by inch, from heartbreak to wholeness. Or in the case of Judah, in our first reading, from exile to homecoming. It’s a wild ride. Sometimes we get going so fast, we don’t even see it. Especially in this season.

So right now, let’s slow down and think for a moment: what is something that scares you, something that you are afraid of? Turn to a person near you, and tell them about it. (On screen worshippers, if you are alone, tell yours, to God.) I will tell you in 30 seconds when it’s time to let the other person talk... 1-2-3, Go! Now, I have one more: think about something that gives you joy, that lifts your heart. Turn to that same person, and share whatever joy (or joys) came to mind... (or say it to God).

Perhaps you are afraid this service will last more than an hour, again... And what a joy if it didn’t. No promises 😊. I’m sure you would not trust me with a promise like that. Here’s my good news for this day: our God, our Emmanuel is the One, the only One we can trust, with all our hearts, and all our souls and all our might. Joseph did. Mary did. They chose God’s better way. And so can we. Right in the middle of our muddle. Right in the middle of our doubts, our confusion. This story shows us: It’s not so much about belief. It’s about trust. Against all odds. Trust is the better part of faith. Trust, not belief. First and foremost, when push comes to shove or a kick in the pants, trust that God will lead us to choose a better way. As Samuel Wells has articulated, “When we think faith is all about belief, we beat ourselves up for not being able to hold together all the mysteries and contradictions and far-fetched ideas. But that’s not what Christianity is really about. The Christian faith is really about trust. It’s not about Jesus the magician whisking us away on a magic carpet of happiness and glory. It’s about facing the unknown and seeing Jesus turn around and say, “We’re going to walk across the unknown together.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Trusting God with the call to ridiculous (to us) Plan B, or C, or D: This is baked into the DNA of our faith story. Remember God’s call to Abraham, way back in Genesis 12, was “Go. Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” “Say what?” You could imagine Abram saying, “but I’m seventy-five years old, settled and comfortably retired here in Haran. Are you crazy?” Definitely a “Plan B” for Abraham. And pretty sketchy on the details: “Go to the land that I will show you.” “Okay, but how do I key that into my GPS? What are the coordinates for the promised land? God didn’t actually give those coordinates to Moses, either. Moses, who was on at least “Plan C” the day he was shepherding his father-in-law’s flock, way out beyond the wilderness, on the lam (pardon the expression) from Pharaoh, who was set to kill him. God told him, from the burning bush, to go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites. Risky. Foolish. How could this plan possibly end well?

Here we are today, against all odds, 3,222 years later. It did, in the long run, go well. God is calling us to look up from our phones, our 30 second sound bites, and see God’s better way. What we choose today impacts the generations that will come after us. Just as our lives have been impacted by the generations before us. Take our life here at FPC. I have three examples of

when our immediate ancestors here at FPC chose a better way, a riskier “Plan B,” or C or D. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit; possibly angels in dreams were involved.

- *Thirty years ago*, in 1992, the Soup or Socks Food Pantry and Clothes Closet, was born. It is currently housed and supported here in our building. The idea for it originated with several of the now great grandparents of our church. A few of whom are sitting in our pews (or watching on screen) today. They saw the need in our Marshfield community to help feed and clothe people in need. And formed a vision for how to do it.
- *Twenty years ago*, our congregation chose to move from our beautiful, comfortable, beloved Chestnut Avenue FPC church building, and build a new church building way out on the Northwest side of town, here on Lincoln and Adler. They heard God calling them to create a space that was more accessible to all, regardless of their physical condition: a building with no stairs, plenty of parking, a t-coil supported system, and more. It was risky and controversial. How our church moved to this location is another great example of when we chose a better way.
- *Over ten years ago*, God graced us with friends who came to our doors on a Sunday morning looking for a Presbyterian church. God brought them to us all the way from Mexico. And some of them stayed and have enriched our church beyond the telling. When our children and grandchildren ask us why we celebrate communion in Spanish and in English, or if anyone wonder why we formed an Immigrant Action Team to advocate for immigrants and refugees about five years ago. The answer involves God calling and our choosing to jump on to God’s new plan. A better way. Every day.

Of course, neither we, nor our ancestors always choose a better way. This is also a very important part of our story. I am convinced God is calling us to look honestly and openly at the missteps in history of our faith, our denomination, and our nation. We can learn as much or more from them as we do from the Abraham, Moses, Mary and Joseph stories. Matthew’s reference to the prophet Isaiah in 7:14, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel” points toward Jesus, for us. Yet, the original context offers the sad example of King Ahaz, (of Judah) who asked for a sign from God. Even though God gave him a way out of his dilemma, Ahaz chose to align with Assyria for military protection. Not the better way.

As T. Denise Anderson has pointed out, we can’t blame Ahaz, “When we’re afraid, we sometimes enter the wrong alliances—borrowing money we can’t repay, engaging in a toxic relationship so we won’t have to be alone, or voting people into office who only serve themselves... We’ve all made questionable choices out of fear. It’s not always easy to believe God’s promises because they often seem ridiculous and fly in the face of conventional wisdom. But God’s promises are sure.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We know, here in our own nation, our ancestors’ choices to view First Nations peoples as “less than” and to view Africans brought over to our country in chains as “less than” was not

God's better way. The damage and the trauma have been passed along through the generations and continue to shape us as a nation to this day. We know our choices made from hubris, or from an unbridle desire for control, fly in the face of all that God has taught us, particularly through the birth, life, death and resurrection of God's Son, our Savior, Emmanuel. Here's the Good News, the Gaudete Message: In Christ, through Christ, we can begin again. We can choose a better way forward to heal, to let our "better angels" bring us forward as a nation that learns from its mistakes as well as its wonderful triumphs. Every day is a chance to make new choices. Better choices, different choices than we did the day before.

I can tell you from my own experience: more often than I'd like to admit, my first idea, my first plan, is *not* God's better way. Be grateful you are not listening to my first drafts of this or any sermon that I have preached from this pulpit. A more major example was how my choice to say "yes" to God's call to become a pastor took place. This "yes" was at least a Plan C that I realized not until I was in my thirties, and well into another career. Take heart: a first plan or choice may be just one step, or even detour along the better way to which God is calling you.

Joseph chose to trust the angel's wild story, and step onto a new path. Not his Plan A, at all. He accepted the risk of "what will people think" and named him Jesus. And with that name, adopting the baby in Mary's womb, as his own. Although he was named, Jesus. I hear Jesus telling us today, "Call me by nickname. Call me Emmanuel. Trust me when I say, I see you and hear you. For I am with you, for you: this day, and every day."

In Christ's presence, Beloved Community, is our everlasting joy.

ⁱ "From Generation to Generation" Advent theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, "The Better Part of Faith," *The Christian Century*, November 2022, pp. 34-35.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Joyful Risk of Christmas: Living the Word," T. Denise Anderson, *Sojourners*, December 2022, p.49.