

Do Not Be Afraid

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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" (Matthew 1:18-21).

Last week you heard the Magnificat, the song of Mary when she believes that God will do great things through her. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," Mary says. "From now on all generations will call me blessed." And of course, all generations *have* called her blessed ever since.

We know how the story turns out, so we forget that Mary didn't know what to make of it at first, when God's messenger showed up out of the blue. Before Mary rejoiced, she was afraid. She had no idea what was happening to her, or where all this would lead. She hadn't read the New Testament. She was just a young woman, a teenager really. She had plans. She was engaged. She figured she'd make a new life with Joseph, start a family, take her kids to soccer. That was predictable, safe, familiar. She knew what to expect.

But then this angel shows up, with his weird tale. He says the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and she'll have a child who will be called the Son of God. He will sit on the throne of David, and of his kingdom there will be no end. This is strong stuff for a poor girl from Galilee, so Gabriel has to reassure her. "Do not be afraid," the angel says, "for you have found favor with God."

If the news is scary for Mary at first, it's even worse for Joseph. His fiancée, the love of his life, is pregnant, and he didn't do it. What could be worse? The heartbreak, the humiliation, the dashing of all his dreams. However much Mary protests her faithfulness, whatever cockamamie story she tells about angels and the Holy Spirit and King David's throne, the only sensible interpretation is that

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either Mary's gone mad or she thinks Joseph is a fool to fall for such a tale. But Joseph is a decent man, and he doesn't want to humiliate Mary, so he decides to let her go away quietly.

Now just as Joseph is struggling to get on with his life, he has this dream. An angel comes to him too, and the angel says, "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."

Why Joseph believes the dream isn't entirely clear. People say that experiences in dreams can be as real as anything they know when they're awake. Somebody told me about a dream like that just the other day. Maybe the messenger has the ring of truth about him. Maybe when heaven speaks so clearly, you just know. Maybe Joseph wants to believe Mary after all. His dream fits her story, and implausible as it sounds, he'd rather take his chances with Mary than live without her. Maybe it's all those things. But whatever else is going on in Joseph's head, one thing is certain: he has to work through his fear. The angel's first word to Joseph is the same as his word to Mary – "Do not be afraid."

If there is a word for all of us in the Christmas story, it's the same word that came to Mary and to Joseph, and later on to the shepherds in the fields, and to everyone else that God breaks in upon: "Don't' be afraid."

We hear so much talk about "the holiday spirit" that everyone is supposed to be getting into this time of year. The relentless cheeriness of music at the mall, or on the radio, makes people think that Christmas is about conjuring up a kind of jolliness – as though, if you're not jolly enough you'll miss out on Christmas. But that so-called "holiday spirit" is a trivial and superficial thing, compared with the deeper meaning, and the deeper joy, of Christmas. Christmas means you don't have to be afraid, no matter what's going on in your life. You don't have to be afraid, because Emmanuel is here. God is with us.

Coincidentally – or maybe not so coincidentally – I've been reading stories and watching movies lately about people who fight through their fears. A great movie out this month is called *The Blind Side*. Sandra Bullock stars as Leigh Anne Tuohy, a rich, white Southern woman who comes across a very big and very poor young black man, a teenager who is all alone. If you know anything about the history of race relations in the South, you know that this is supposed to be the archetypal scary situation. But Leigh Anne is a Christian, and she takes that

seriously; and besides, she's a feisty woman who isn't about to be driven by the prejudices and stereotypes of some of the people around her.

The movie is funny and poignant, very well written, and based on a true story. Long story short, the rich family takes in the poor kid, and they encourage him to play football because he's a natural athlete. He becomes a star in high school, then at the University of Mississippi, and finally he gets drafted this year as a lineman for the Baltimore Ravens. The movie is so good that it almost made the Steelers' loss to the Ravens less painful, because the young man, Michael Oher, played a great game. If you haven't seen it yet, *The Blind Side* is a fitting film for Christmas, a season that reminds us how great things can happen when we heed the angel's word, "Do not be afraid."

I just finished a biography of one of my heroes, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Chamberlain was a seminary graduate, and a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College, who became the colonel of the Twentieth Maine Regiment in the Civil War. In the Battle of Gettysburg, Chamberlain was assigned to hold on to Little Round Top at all costs. Little Round Top was a wooded, rocky hill on the extreme left end of the Union line. If the Confederates could get around it, they would be able to collapse the Union position, defeat the Northern army, march on to Harrisburg, and quite possibly win the war.

The Twentieth Maine was supposed to have 1000 soldiers, but by the time they got to Gettysburg there were only 200 and some healthy enough to fight. The battle on July 3, 1863, went on fiercely for a couple of hours, with Chamberlain's regiment fighting off wave after wave of Confederate attackers. Finally, his men were exhausted and out of ammunition, but Chamberlain decided that if he was going to hold on to that hill, he would have to take the initiative before the Southerners had time to regroup. So he ordered his men to fix bayonets, and they charged down the hill, screaming, right into the ranks of the enemy. The Confederates didn't know that the Yankees were out of bullets, and they were so astonished by the attack that 400 of them surrendered. Little Round Top was held, General Lee's army withdrew the next day, and Gettysburg became the turning point of the Civil War.

Chamberlain won the Congressional Medal of Honor, and went on to become the governor of Maine and president of Bowdoin College. He was also a man of faith, who believed that his life, and the lives of his men, the course of the war, and everything else were "in the hands of Providence." After he was critically

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wounded at Petersburg, when he thought he might not survive, Chamberlain wrote to his mother:

I believe in a destiny – one, I mean, divinely appointed.... I have laid plans, in my day, & good ones I thought. But they never succeeded. Something else, better, did, and I could see it as plain as day, that God had done it, & for my good.¹

We know how these stories turn out, but the people who lived them did not know. Chamberlain didn't know, when his men were exhausted and out of ammunition, that if he ordered that crazy charge down the hill, the enemy would surrender, the line would hold, and the battle, and ultimately the war itself, would be won. Leigh Anne Tuohy did not know, when she invited Michael Oher into her home, that he would turn out to be a gentle and loving young man, despite his enormous size and power on the football field, and that he'd become part of her family and a pro football player, and their story would be made into a movie. The people in true stories that inspire us never knew how their stories would turn out. Like Mary and Joseph, they were afraid, but they listened to the voice of their better angels, when the voice said, "Do not be afraid."

Christmas is not about being jolly. It's about taking the angel of the Lord at his word. It's about believing – when we don't know what will happen, when we're most afraid of what lies ahead. Christmas is about believing that God can be trusted, no matter what.

Often we can't see very far ahead in life; we only know what needs to be done right now. Sometimes all we know is that we have to hold this particular hill at all costs, take a stand right here and not give up. All we know is that it isn't right to see a kid alone and homeless, and not help if you have the resources to care for him. Sometimes all we know is that this is what we must do here and now, and the rest is in the hands of God.

In fact, that's all we know most of the time. The future is uncertain, even when we think we have things under control. All we really know is Emmanuel, God with us. But that's all we need to know, isn't it? That's enough.

¹Alice Rains Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua L. Chamberlain & the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina, 1992), 219.

Someone has said that life is like driving at night. You can only see so far in the headlights, but you can make the whole journey with just the light in front of you. We all see different things in the headlights, don't we? Some of us see happy things: new babies, or family reunions, or celebrations. Some of us see sickness – our own or someone's for whom we care. Some of us see an empty space where a person we love used to be. Some of us see not much at all; we have no idea what's around the bend or where we are headed.

We see different things in the little light we have. Some of it is happy, some of it is sad, some of it is scary, all of it is tentative, none of it is guaranteed. The only thing that is guaranteed forever is God, and the love of God. That's the one sure thing in this world. If you believe that, then you may or may not be jolly this Christmas, but there ought to be, deep down in the well of your soul, a hopefulness, and even a kind of joy.

Joy is not the same as jollity. It's a contentment that's rooted in faith, hope, and love. Joy can be deep enough and strong enough to hold even sadness and uncertainty for a while. So Joseph can hold on to Mary, and Mary can hold baby Jesus, though neither of them knows how it will all turn out. They can do that because they know God is holding them, and so they don't have to be afraid.

And of course, even though they don't know it yet, their story turns out to be very good in the end.