

Reflections of the Gospel Text: *Matthew 1.18-23*

Steve Berneking, Ph.D.

We are accustomed to think quite idealistically about the unexpected birth of this child Jesus...to glamorize and sentimentalize that event. It seems to me, this tendency to romanticize the event leads us to assume that the event, as described in our biblical text, involved no struggle, no fear, no worry, no loss or shame of any kind.

We would be negligent if we read the text with such blinders. Even in the few verses we just heard, we encounter such phrases: *found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*; *unwilling to expose her to public disgrace* (unwilling to embarrass her); *planned to dismiss her quietly* (decided to quietly call off the wedding); *do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife*. These reactions are attributed in our text to Joseph. The situation in which Joseph found himself was not easy or joyful or happy. It's likely there was plenty of darkness mingled with lightness for Joseph there in Bethlehem.

Things were not necessarily so straightforward and planned for Mary as well. In the text we heard, Mary is on the receiving end of Joseph's reactions: she was the one found to be with child from the Holy Spirit; she was the one who faced possible public disgrace and being dismissed quietly from the community; she was the one who faced abandonment.

We could include also the worry and secrecy of King Herod, as well as the fear of the magi to return home a different way to avoid the frantic Herod.

Such narratives remind us that the faces of those characters circling around the birth of Jesus might have had more grimaces than grins, more smirks than smiles, more feelings of despair than elation.

And that's okay. The biblical narratives, throughout our Canon of Scripture, struggle to present all its characters as real humans, fully existing in that peculiar mix of joy and suffering...sometimes more joy and sometimes more suffering. That is one of the most significant literary threads that connects most all the biblical texts: life is not always easy, much less predictable, and the God of these narratives knows that and is present with us in the midst of our dis-ease.

The biblical stories, I would argue, give us the freedom to acknowledge the reality of our pain and our joy, our worry and our relief, our moments of oppression and our moments of liberation...even during these "joy-filled" seasons of Advent and Christmas.

For me, that's the gift of this Blue Christmas service. We are here together, bringing whatever is stirring in us, and will just maybe...to claim a renewed hope in meeting God here, to find strength to accept the difficult reality of our "stuff," and to discover a renewed strength in being with others for whom life is also sometimes a struggle, sometimes just "icky."

But we remind ourselves that the biblical narratives that speak about the worry and confusion and disgrace around the birth of Jesus also speak about joy and lightness and praise that surrounded the event. Hope and relief can come to us even in startling ways, at surprising moments, through unexpected neighbors. That is the hope to which we hold fast even in our seasons of loss and worry and anxiety. That is the joy that can come to us even in the long dark nights of our soul's winters. That is the release from whatever binds us and pulls us down.

That is why I now invite you to light your own candles this Winter Solstice: to remember lost loved ones or missed opportunities; to redeem pain and loss; to reclaim hope and steadfastness; to recall once again that God comes to us in darkness and holds us close.

In a few moments, I will invite you to come forward, in two lines...to take a candle, light it from the center one, and place it in the sand...being kind and compassionate and forgiving to yourself and what you carry. While we do that, Mosaic will play "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Before that happens, however, I want to share with you a poem that you've possibly heard before. It's a poem by African American author, theologian, educator, civil rights leader Howard Thurman. You can Google his name if you want to know more about him and his significance in the life of Martin Luther King and many others.

Hear now the words of his poem "I will light candles this Christmas":

I will light candles this Christmas:
candles of joy despite all sadness,
candles of courage where fear is ever present,
candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
candles of love to inspire all my living,
candles that will burn all year long.

Come now to light your candles this Christmas. Emmanuel, God is indeed with us.

Amen.