

December 18th, 2022 – BMC Sermon: “(Un)welcome Signs and Other Mysteries”

Around twenty or so years ago, I received the one and only traffic ticket I have ever received in my life. The infraction involved turning right on a side street to take a bit of a shortcut to the local computer shop that I worked at in Winnipeg. I had taken this shortcut many times before without issue and there was nothing about this side street that would have led me to suspect that one day, after complaints from increased traffic in this residential area, traffic officers would place a new sign at the corner of St. Mary’s Road and that Carriere Avenue indicating that it was illegal to turn right on that road during rush hour. I was not watching for such a sign – I was not expecting it. And wouldn’t you imagine my surprise, then, when one morning I turned the corner to take my shortcut, only to be immediately ushered to the side of the road by a police officer lying in wait and issued a \$125 ticket. When I protested to the officer that I had turned down this road so many times before, I was met with the question: “Did you see the sign telling you that it was now illegal to do so?” Clearly, I had not. While I tried to contest the ticket given the newness of the sign, even taking it as far as the traffic office, I was simply told, “As a responsible driver, you are always required to be aware of and follow all traffic signs, including new ones.” And so, I begrudgingly paid the ticket and never used the shortcut again. My daily routine, shaped as it was based on my assumptions of how to best get to work, was interrupted by the establishment of a new order of things decided by the traffic authorities.

Signs, whenever and wherever we encounter them, are basic to our human experience, whether they be signs that are welcome or not! In fact, many linguistic theorists talk about all language and communication as being fundamentally based on an endlessly evolving system of signs. But, while signs give us the immense power to communicate and follow instruction, they also can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or as was the case for me, left unnoticed until it was

too late! Given the basic importance of signs for us human beings, for communication and for understanding, it is not at all surprising that they also occupy an important role all throughout scripture as it describes the relationship between God and God's people. In scripture, sometimes signs are described as physical objects placed on the body or in the home as *reminders* of matters of great importance – in Deuteronomy, for example, the people of Israel were instructed to take the confession

“The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,”

and bind it *as a sign* on their hands and *an emblem* on their foreheads, and to write them on the doorposts of their houses and on their gates. Other times, signs in scripture carry social and political power to communicate and provoke, such as when the prophets would perform symbolic acts, sometimes quite shocking, like Isaiah walking barefoot and naked for 3 years—as a sign of God's coming judgment.

In this same vein, signs in scripture often appear to indicate a coming change to the present order of things, whether for the benefit or loss of those to whom the sign is addressed. This was the kind of sign Isaiah gave to King Ahaz in our scripture reading for today – the young woman about to give birth was to be a sign for King Ahaz that God would protect Judah from the northern Kings that threatened to overtake Judah – the child was to be named Immanuel, a sign that God would be with Judah in its time of need. This sign from Isaiah is, of course, very important during Advent, for many years later it would become a sign that took on new depth and meaning with the pregnancy of a young 1st century Jewish woman named Mary. In the Gospel of Matthew, we don't find a prophet addressing a King that a young woman's pregnancy would be a sign that God was with them. Rather, we find an Angel visiting a humble carpenter named Joseph and announcing to him that his fiancé Mary's pregnancy was a sign of God's

presence with them, and not only that, but that Mary was carrying in her womb the very one who would bring God's salvation to their people.

But, as we learned from our scripture reading about Joseph today, his initial discovery of Mary's pregnancy did *not* lead him to this interpretation. At first, her pregnancy was resolutely *not* a sign, for him, of something good. In fact, as surely as Mary's pregnancy caused her to be afraid, so also did Mary's pregnancy strike fear into Joseph's heart, along with, I'm sure, a sense of betrayal. And so, it's not surprising that the angel's first words to Joseph are "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid." Do not be afraid of what?:

Matthew 1:20 "...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

As I read these dramatic words in preparation for today, I could not help but think back to our recent Genesis Journey's series, to a different man who lived thousands of years before Joseph the carpenter, a man who was also told "not to be afraid," and to have faith that God was up to something good in the midst of troubling uncertainty. This man was also visited with unexpected and shocking news: Your wife will give birth to a son. Of course, in the Genesis series, it was elderly Abraham and his equally elderly wife Sarah who were given this shocking news, and of course, given their age, the news received wasn't so much scandalous but rather simply outrageous and laughable. How could they possibly have a child? How could the God who made promises to bless Abraham and his descendants, possibly do so through giving him a child in old age and through his barren wife Sarah? Abraham and Sarah had already ruled out such a possibility and had sought a different, more pragmatic approach: Abraham's lineage could be carried forward through Sarah's slave Hagar and the son borne to her, Ishmael. But God insisted that *Sarah* would bear Abraham a son, a son of promise who would be a sign of God's blessing in a world that lay under the curse of human disregard and violence, a world of sin and death.

In the passage from Matthew for today we move way down the family tree of Abraham and Sarah to Joseph and his soon to be wife Mary. Aside from the huge timespan, there are of course numerous other significant differences to note between the stories of these two expectant couples. First and foremost, rather than being a very old married couple like Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary were a young, engaged couple – indeed, while we don't really know how old Joseph was, many scholars suggest that Mary was likely quite young, as young as 14. And, of course, another big difference in our passage for today is that before Joseph is visited by an Angel, he doesn't welcome the news of Mary's *upcoming* pregnancy.¹ Unlike Abraham, prior to the Angel of the Lord appearing to him in a dream, Joseph had already come to know that Mary was “with child” and he knew that it had *not* happened with his involvement. And so, rather than receiving Mary's pregnancy as good news, as a sign of God's faithfulness as was the case with Abraham and Sarah, the news of Mary's pregnancy surely came to Joseph as an unwelcome sign – a sign of betrayal.

Matthew gives us an image of Joseph as a loving and sensitive person who, despite the difficult circumstances and despite feeling betrayed, recognized how equally scary this must all have been for Mary and how unfairly things would play out for her if he chose to be vindictive about the whole situation. He could, at this point, very well decide to make her into a negative sign among their people, a sign of judgment and shame, but that would only make an already tough situation worse. Matthew tells us that this is not what Joseph wanted, for he was a righteous and law-abiding Jewish man who had no ill-intent for Mary and who knew the law

¹ In her article, “The Real Problem with Mary's Baby Bump,” Lynn Cohick argues that sex between an engaged couple in Jesus' day would not necessarily have been seen as problematic. What was problematic was that in this case it appeared as though Mary had had sex with someone else.

gave provision for divorce in such instances. So, he sought to have a quiet separation instead of making a big deal out of the whole situation.²

But until the Angel visited him, Joseph seems to have not seriously considered another possibility based on a different understanding of the *sign* that Mary's pregnancy represented – go through with the marriage, for the child Mary was carrying was not a sign of infidelity—of breaking their marriage promise—but rather, her pregnancy was a sign that God was coming among the people to *keep* the promise made so long ago to Joseph and Mary's ancestors. Of course, the Angel's announcement must have been a tough pill to swallow for Joseph, even after being told that Mary's pregnancy fulfilled the Prophet Isaiah's words about the young woman conceiving.³ And what was all this business about the child being “from the Holy Spirit,” anyway? Perhaps, Joseph might have grasped for explanations derived from the foundational stories of his people. We can imagine him saying: “Ok, well, scripture does say that God gave Sarah the power to conceive a son of promise though being old and barren; what is to stop God from bringing the promised Messiah into the world with Mary's consent, right?” *But* likely, news of this conception would have sounded as incredible for Joseph back then as it is does for us today. And, if this whole virginal conception wasn't enough of a barrier, the decision to go through with the marriage might have seemed foolish to Joseph for other reasons: If things are

² Jewish scholars that seek to combat Christian interpretations that demonize Judaism, note that it is not correct to interpret Joseph as displaying grace over against the harsh laws of Judaism with respect to divorcing Mary. While Deuteronomy 22 includes the brutal laws around stoning a woman who had broken her marriage vows by engaging in intercourse with another man (or men), scholars and Rabbinic interpreters don't think this law was ever used much and by Jesus' time would not have been a common practice. This is especially the case given that recourse to such a judgment required so much evidence as to make it almost impossible to enforce.

³ There is a whole fascinating and complicated discussion and debate surrounding the Greek translation of Isaiah, which renders the Hebrew word *almah* (meaning young woman) as “virgin” (Gk. *parthenos*) and the subsequent use of that translation in Matthew. But, there is no space to get into that here other than to say, even if the original Hebrew *almah* denoted a young woman in general (and not necessarily a virgin), in Matthew's Gospel that was the sense it was understood to have, which accorded with belief in the special circumstances of Jesus' birth as Messiah. Of course, the virgin birth, as an article of faith, like many others, is a stumbling block to some and to others a beautiful mystery of the faith.

already off to this kind of unexpected start, would more of this come in the future? What if he didn't know Mary like he thought he knew her? Despite his fears, the words of the Angel could not be easily dismissed:

Matthew 1:20 "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.

Matthew's description of the Angel's appearance to Joseph in a dream is so short and fast-paced, that we don't get any sense for whether or how long Joseph deliberated over what to do before making his decision. Instead, it is brief and blunt:

"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife."

As with Mary's brief encounter with the Angel, there is so much concealed drama packed into Joseph's encounter too; so much packed even into the words: "he did" and "he took;" "*he did* as the angel of the Lord commanded him; *he took* her as his wife." Joseph's decision to do as the angel commanded him required letting go of what seemed sure to him – what the signs had seemed to indicate -- to embrace instead a new order of things that God was bringing to the world, a new order that had begun with God's invitation and Mary's "Yes" to the call to bear God within her. Joseph, for his part, had to give his own "Yes" to this and with that "Yes," had to let go of his preconceived ideal for what his life together with Mary and their child would look like. Joseph had to step out in faith, believing that Mary's pregnancy really was a sign of promise. These were significant decisions for Joseph to make, decisions that rank up there with the likes of Abraham leaving his Father's house to an unknown land.

And yet, what is so striking about Joseph's character in Matthew as well as in Luke, is just how little we know about him. In both Matthew and Luke, Joseph is briefly mentioned just before, during, and after Jesus' birth, then he's there to escort Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape

Herod's vicious search for him and then back to Israel upon Herod's death. Finally, in Luke he is there during some of Jesus' adolescent years when he and Mary discover that Jesus had stayed behind in the temple, but that's it. He doesn't appear at all in the Gospel of Mark and is only mentioned under Jesus' title "son of Joseph" early on in John's Gospel. After his brief mention in Matthew and Luke, Joseph, the stable, unassuming Father of Jesus, fades from view completely in the New Testament. While testimony to Mary's life is, thankfully, present in the Gospels up to Jesus' death, Joseph's testimony appears nowhere beyond the first few chapters of Matthew and Luke; presumably he passed away sometime during Jesus' growing up years. No one really knows. Perhaps the scant attention Joseph gets in the Gospels is why even our more recent hymn books don't really include hymns about Joseph either. But I think there is something important missing during Advent if we fail to pay attention to the character of this humble figure, the father of Jesus, and the unwelcome sign that he chose to welcome and nurture by faith.

Perhaps just this is what some of us need to learn from Joseph: to be open to the unexpected and mysterious depths of God's involvement in our world in signs that can seem unwelcome and disruptive to us. For Joseph's "Yes" to God shows us that what at first glance might appear as an unwelcome or disruptive sign might just be a sign—or indeed the very reality of—the mystery of God incarnate among us, coming to change the order of things, to bring newness and salvation. And so, here is our challenge for the remainder of Advent: be ready and pay attention, even to the dreams we have, for a new sign might appear in our daily routines—it might be unwelcome at first, but maybe, just maybe, that sign will point us to the unexpected and mysterious work of God restoring the world – a work that God will invite us to humbly support and nurture with the time we've been given, even if we ourselves will only fade into the background of a story much bigger than ourselves. AMEN