

Speaker 1: We are, as I said earlier, continuing our journey through the season of advent. Advent is a word that means coming and as we are aware, as a time of longing, of watching, of praying for God's healing, for God's transforming presence to be evermore vibrantly present in the world and man, we need it now more than ever, don't we? We need that healing presence. We need that transformative power. We need that inbreaking of the Holy. Now more than ever with all that is going on in the world, all that is going on in our nation. We watched the news, we shake our heads, we ring our hands. We need that healing presence. This year we are looking at the stories of the angels that appear in the story of Jesus's birth and I pointed out that they would be very comfortable in the world of tweets and hashtags that their messages were often short and to the point their favorite line was hashtag do not be afraid, ms.

Speaker 1: we're looking at these stories of these winged creatures. We are thinking what our messages might be as people of faith, what messages we can offer that would counteract that culture of fear in which we find ourselves, ways in which we might be able to bring more hope and peace and joy and love into this world. Last week we looked at the story of [inaudible], the announcement to Mary that she was going to have a child and not just any child. That story is found in Luke's gospel in Luke's gospel is told from Mary's perspective, from her point of view. Today we're going to look at a similar story though. This one in Matthew's gospel, whereas Luke tells Mary's side of the story. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective. While he's an important character in the story, you may notice that he always tends to get shoved aside passed over in Matthew, the only gospel in which Jesus Joseph appears. He shows up in chapter one he disappears by chapter two and never does he say a single word. He's the strong, silent type in all of his encounters with Joseph. We hear him say, not a single, but what we'll notice this morning is we listen to the story is that he is one who speaks not with his words but with his actions. So I invite you to listen and hear this story from Matthew's gospel.

Speaker 2: Today's scripture reading is from the gospel of Matthew chapter one verses eight three 18 through 25 now the birth of Jesus, the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, who 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. Plan 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,

Speaker 3: 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.

Speaker 2: All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet. Look, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us. When Joseph awoke from the sleep, he did his angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had born assigned and he named him Jesus. The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Speaker 1: Well, I think those of you with children, those of you who have ever had children will back me up. Did the three most anxious filled words it'll strike fear in any parent are simply these, some assembly required? Is there anything that makes us more anxious than that? I heard a story not too long ago about a father who bought a tree house for his children and Tom came for him to put it together. He laid out all the parts, had the instructions in his hand, but almost immediately he came to realize that there was something wrong. The instructions that he had in his hand were for the tree house, but the parts that he had laid out were for a sailboat.

Speaker 1: The next day he sent an email to the company complaining about the mixup and he got this reply, sir, we are truly sorry for the error and the inconvenience. However, would it help to consider the possibility that somewhere right now there's a man on a Lake trying to sale your Treehouse. As we get closer to the big day, we have to remember and to recognize and to realize that there is still some assembly required for Christmas and hopefully you were ready or at least getting ready and maybe perhaps you have started by getting your house decorated. One of my favorite rituals every year is setting up the nativity scene. I always let Kelly and the kids decorate the tree. My job has always been, even from the time I was a child to arrange then the Tivity scenes and as far back as I can remember, that was my responsibility and one that I took very seriously.

Speaker 1: I still remember at the time that I was in seminary and I tried to explain to my mother, uh, that, that the shepherds should not be their mom. They don't appear until the day of epiphany so they cannot be here. So I had them in the next room. She was not amused, she was not amused. I took my job a little too seriously that year. But one of the things that I recognize that every year you can never be completely sure which one is Joseph. It could be one of the shepherds, maybe one of the wise men. And to make things even more complicated, you can notice whether or not your nativity scene is done by an artist who is Catholic and Protestant by recognizing whether or not, if, if Joseph is a appears as an old man, it's a Catholic artist. If it's a young man, it's a Protestant artist, Mary, she's easy to tell. But every year I would look at that and the Tivity scene and I would wonder if I had the right man as the father of that baby. Now, of course that was Joseph's worry too.

Speaker 1: Now I collect nativity scenes in several years ago I was traveling to the general assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I went into a store while I was there and I found that activity scene that I absolutely loved and I purchased it and it came all wrapped up in a nice box and I set it aside, waiting, waiting for Christmas to arrive that year. And sure enough time came and I pulled out my brand new and the activity scene one that I was very excited about and much like the man trying to put together the tree house with the parts to a sailboat, I recognized almost immediately that something was wrong in my nativity scene. There was no Joseph. I had two marries, but no Joseph and I was going to send it back. But I decided later that I would not, and I display it proudly every year as my feminist theology nativity scene.

Speaker 1: Poor Joseph. He always gets shoved aside and passed over. In fact, if you go to the interpreter's dictionary of the Bible and look under J for Joseph, it simply says the husband, the Mer mother of Jesus, and that's about it. Matthew's gospel spends the

first 17 verses detailing Joseph's family tree and it begins with Abraham and explains all 14 generations including the shining star, the family, David, until finally he gets down to Joseph and the rather awkward connection to Jesus, the Messiah, and think to a poor Joseph. He was engaged to be married, probably not to the love of his life, but more than likely someone that his family had negotiated for him to marry. It wasn't like that. They had fallen head over heels in love and some romantic courtship. It would've been more like a business transaction, an arranged marriage. But nonetheless, it was done and they were engaged.

Speaker 1: And in that time it pretty much meant that the deal was pretty much sealed. And even though they weren't living together yet, everyone knew that they were betrothed. And if a problem arose, you couldn't just take the ring back. You couldn't just cancel the florist. You had to go through the messy, painful process of filing for a divorce. And with Mary no longer being able to fit in her jeans. There was indeed what we might call a problem. And with each passing week that problem got bigger and bigger and bigger. Now last week you may remember that we were reading from Luke's gospel and in that gospel it seems like anytime there's an announcement, anytime something significant happens, the women in the story just sort of burst out in song. Sort of like the nativity was some sort of a musical theater production. But in Matthew things, I hope you heard one more subtle. It simply says, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy spirit, as if that sort of thing happens all the time.

Speaker 1: It seems as if Matthew wants us to discover that God's spirit is at work in the world, that God is working through this unknown, this ordinary couple to do something extraordinary. And in that subtlety, it's important that we read between the lines that we sort of insert our own human emotion into the story. Because you've got to imagine, you can clearly, easily understand the internal struggle that Joseph must've been going through. You've got to wonder if maybe he was wondering if maybe he had married the wrong girl. Certainly he was wrestling with some doubts. What were people going to say? What did all of this mean? He must've been caught up in a cycle of fear and frustration. Worry now to his credit, he did what most of us would at time in that situation, he turned to his faith. Now the text says, the text says that he was a righteous man.

Speaker 1: That means that he knew the scriptures. He understood the Judaic law. He lived his life according to the law. He knew what it said about women and adultery. He knew that in this situation, in a situation just like this did, he had essentially two different options. One, he could have her stoned to death. That's what it says. Deuteronomy 22 women caught in adultery shall be brought out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death. It's right in your Bibles right there in front of you. Deuteronomy 22 now, the other option is that he could simply cast Mary out. He could disgrace her, he could get that divorce, just be done with it. And if you heard, that's essentially what he had planned to do, but he also knew that for her that would be a death sentence, that her life would be ruined. There was no way for her to earn a living. She would never be able to marry. No one would ever take care of her. And in that situation, she either dies or becomes a slave or prostitute.

Speaker 1: Fred Craddock used to say that he always gets tired of people that wheel the 43 pound Bible and just say, just do what the Bible says. Like you can just open up the sacred scriptures and turn to a passage. And that clears everything up. I think those of us who have lived a life of faith for more than about 20 minutes know that life is rarely like that. And so what Joseph did, he did an amazing thing for that time and place. He brought both his heart and his mind to the interpretation of the sacred word. You read the scriptures not only through the lens of the law, but also through the lens of the nature of God. He based his life not just on what he read, but also would he come to head, come to know what he had come to experience about the nature and the character of God and based on his own family tree, he knew that God is merciful, that God is full of grace, that God above all else loves us way beyond our deserving in that way.

Speaker 1: I suppose Joseph is a lot like us in that he worries about what to do with this life. He wrestles with difficult decisions, almost none of which are ever easy and clear cut. And I can only imagine that that night that he paced the floor that he tossed and turned, that he got very little sleep, that that the internal dialogue must've been something like this. On the one hand Mary, but on the other hand, the law and I suppose that all of us would struggle with a decision like that. And not take it too lightly. And so in that way, I suppose he's a lot like us. And then right there in the middle of that silent night, in the midst of this dark night of the soul, he has this dream and this angel appears to him with a message and basically says that what looks like a failed marriage will become a sign that God is at work in the world. And that through him that through them God will smuggle joy and hope and peace and love into the world.

Speaker 1: And did you hear the first words spoken by the angel Joseph, son of David? Say with me. Now, do not be afraid. Now of all the commandments in the Bible of which there are 613 commandments of all the instructions, this one, this one is spoken most often about 365 times. Some say one for every day of the year. The instruction is given repeated over and over again. Fear not. Do not be afraid. You see, I think the scripture writers understood that fear is a complex emotion and it often robs us of the life that we so desperately want. And sometimes, sometimes it even robs us of experiencing the joy that is present in the life that we already have. You see, the reality is that all of us worry about something. We all have something that we fear and most of us will have seasons in which anxieties and fear, they just simply overwhelm us. It's a powerful emotion that shapes us in ways that we may not even fully understand. In fact, if you look behind depression's door, you'll often find fear addictions too. If you peer beneath broken marriages and friendships between uh, beneath prejudice and hate, more often than not, you'll find fear. In my ministry, I have seen firsthand in the lives of people that I love, how fear can in prison can paralyze us from experiencing a fulfilling, joyful life.

Speaker 1: But Joseph is determined not to let his fear and his worry and his anxieties control him and so filled with the spirit of God. Jeez. Joseph sees the Bible and his patrols through the eyes of grace. Rather than following the law to the letter, he sees it through the eyes of God and allows love and grace and mercy to determine his fear, his path, and not fear. In Tom Brokaw's book, the greatest generation a story is told of a woman by the name of Mary Wilson lives to this day in Dallas. You would never know it by looking at this modest woman that she is the recipient of the silver star and she bore the

nickname the angel of Anzio. Now, history boss may remember that when the allies got bogged down in the boot of Italy in the midst of world war II, that they attempted a daring landing on Anzio beach and unfortunately the allies get pinned down at the landing site and came dangerously close to being pushed back into the ocean.

Speaker 1: In many ways, it looked like another Dunkirk in the making. Mary Wilson was the head of the 51 army nurse nurses who went ashore at Anzio and things got so bad. At one point that bullets were zipping through her tent as she assisted the surgeons caring for the fallen soldiers and when the situation continued to deteriorate, deteriorate plans were finally made to get all of the nurses out, but Mary Wilson couldn't leave. She wouldn't leave. She would refuse to leave at that great hour and years later as she related her story, she simply said, how could I possibly leave them? They were a part of me. I was a part of them.

Speaker 1: I think Joseph based his challenges too, he risked public humiliation, utter embarrassment. He had to risk his very ordinary life for a child that wasn't even his and he found in the still silence, so that dark night when God intruded into his life and explained that greatness would come not to him, but through him, and I can imagine, can't you? Years later, as he was retelling his story and almost in a whisper, he said, how could I possibly leave them? They were a part of me [inaudible] and I was a part of them. You see shirts, the day is coming when God will use a messenger to remind us that we are chosen by an infant King whose kingdom is not of this world. And until that day comes, we are invited to be quiet, to be still long enough to heal. Hear that still small voice.