

“Hope is Worth the Risk”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1: 46-55

Last week the whole sermon gathered around Tina Turner’s *We Don’t Need Another Hero*. This week, we center around the phrase, “We don’t need another cynic.” It may be true that “it can feel safer and easier to be a cynic, but the world doesn’t more cynics. It needs people who say, ‘It can be better,’ and make it so.” In short, we need a whole lot of Josephs. You know Joseph, the guy that we seem to think plays a minor role in the birth of Jesus. He never gets a speaking part in the Christmas cantatas or plays, and his role isn’t nearly as coveted as Mary, the angel, the wise men, or even the innkeeper. Some might think we could have Christmas as normal without him even in the dramas we produce. Oh, how wrong we are! For without Joseph’s depth of character and his willingness to live in the hope that something good could come of all of this, Christmas would be a whole lot different.

Think about it. For Joseph, according to Matthew’s gospel, he’s simply told that Mary is pregnant. He knows he had nothing to do with it. He also knows that he and Mary were betrothed, “which was a legally binding part of the ancient marriage arrangement and it occurred before the home-going to the husband’s family. Breaking off the marriage at this point involved matters of law (hence the language of divorce), showing it to be unlike the ending of a modern marriage (Kelley Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of*

Hope, p118).” In other words, Joseph could ask for economic compensation in addition to the divorce – the impounding of the dowry and possible return of the bride price. In short, he could not only divorce Mary and leave her destitute, he could get paid pretty handsomely.

Further, according to Kelley Nikondeha in her book *The First Advent in Palestine*, if Joseph went through with it, the divorce would require public conversations with Joseph’s community elders and would make known Mary’s compromised condition. “She was already on the verge of public disgrace, but she still mattered to him,” writes Nikondeha. So, he resolves to divorce her quietly, avoiding more shame for Mary, and forfeiting the dowry. “It was not worth the monetary benefit to push someone lower, and Mary was already down, as far as Joseph’s calculations were concerned.” He might even have to endure social scorn if he didn’t put Mary through the process of divorce. His name might not be cleared publicly. “Still, he seemed willing to accept a measure of shared shame to shield [Mary] from society’s worst (Ibid).”

Nikondeha writes, “In Joseph, a different economic practice was at work. He valued Mary as a person, beyond what some of money he could demand.” In contrast to the Joseph of the Old Testament, this Joseph would be a different sort of patriarch, fathering a new economic calculus for those on the road of God’s liberating peace. Just because you deserve it, doesn’t mean it’s the right thing to do.

Then, of course, Joseph is met by the angel who tells him the larger story. No one should be surprised that the first words out of the angel’s mouth was, “Do not fear!”. Further, the angel instructs Joseph not to divorce Mary at all. Nikondeha writes, “Joseph obeyed the angel. In doing so, he said yes to Mary, to her child, and to the stigma of the situation. He awoke to the harsh reality that he’d be implicated by her too-early pregnancy.” And yet, like Mary, Joseph said yes.

So Joseph and Mary limped their way through the betrothal. He entered into her disgrace. now the questions that surrounded them were about *their* piety and purity. They shouldered the shame together. The men at the city gate likely demeaned Joseph, no longer thinking him righteous. But God had invited him into the heart of the divine deliverance operation – along with its social stigma. Indeed, following the unborn Christ already had consequences.

Quite the minor part Joseph played, eh? You do remember that it is through the line of Joseph that Jesus is tied to King David, right? You also likely know that Mary could have been destitute if Joseph divorced her. Caught in up shame, economic hardship and social scorn, it would seem the stable birth would be the least of Jesus' worries growing up. You see, "The first advent revealed that leaning into God's coming justice puts people at odds with society's and religion's definitions of holiness. Advent just might make life harder. Yet we know what Joseph knew: God is with us. "This is how Matthew sets up the story. Joseph and Mary held fast to the assurance of God-with-us (Nikondeha, p121)."

We already know that both Joseph and Mary were righteous, faithful people, but we often miss the great risks they took so that Immanuel – God with us – could be born.

I think they did it more than just because of angel visitations – although those would help things! They also did it because they lived life in hope. It's easy to give hope a bad rap. But what if hope is "not a flimsy emotion dependent on outcomes, but a robust spiritual practice?", ask the authors from Sanctified Arts who developed the resources we're using this Advent season.

The writers go on to tell us that, "this week's texts give us examples of hope in action. Both Mary and Joseph each have a lot they could lose, respectively. Yet, they choose radical acts of hope – and the world is better for it."

Kayla Craig tells us that “Hope isn’t flimsy – it’s a force that propels us toward God’s presence and redemptive plan for all creation, for all time. It’s vulnerable to hope. The more we hope, the more we can be disappointed. For those of us who bear scars from the hurt of this world, hope can feel scary – too risky, too unrealistic. Cynicism seems like a safer, more straight-forward path.” No wonder we have so many cynics. It’s safer. It’s easier. And, dare I say, it’s popular. The cynic is often seen as so smart since he/she knew that things wouldn’t work out. The person of hope, well, they’re kind of romantic, out-of-touch, or have some other mental health issue. Maybe we don’t say it that bluntly, but we often act that way.

But here’s the thing: Cynicism doesn’t change the world – hope does. Hope challenges us to declare, “It can be better,” and empowers us to make it so. Kayla Craig goes on to say, “Our weary world doesn’t need any more cynics and scoffers – but as wars rage and divisions heighten, we desperately need hope-bearers who point us to a better way, one where life is made new and lies of share and fear don’t have the final say. Our hope is a reflection of God’s plans for the world – plans for renewal and restoration in the face of death and despair.”

Joseph and Mary hoped against hope. In the face of impossibilities, they believed in the possibility of a better world. They placed their trust in God alone...Joseph acts with hope.

Mary proclaims it. And their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo into eternity.

That is what the scriptures for today – and the rest of the birth narrative – tell us. “Joseph’s decision to embrace divine assurance rather than succumb to societal expectations to untangle himself from his pregnant fiancée -- is a radical act of hope.”

Well, good for them, but we’re much more logical and we know better. Right? I mean, in many places across the nation and the world, but even in the church, we hear things like, “The

church is dying; no one is going to come.” or “We don’t have enough money to people to do _____.” Can the scriptures from today and the lives of Mary and Joseph lead us to dare to live a different story? You see, as Dana McKibben tells us, “True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcome.” The worst things might happen, but if we refuse to live into hope and we refuse to follow God in this risky adventure called life, then definitely bad things will happen. But if we live a different narrative, the outcome might be different as well. We don’t really know. But I invite you to join me in living as hopefully as possible. I believe it’s worth the risk.

In the words of Kayla Craig, “In this season of hope, may you find the courage to hold onto hope and act on it, to let the divine trust of Mary and Joseph weave through the fabric of your life.”

Let me end by sharing with you this blessing:

Lies of cynicism are loud, and so are the voices of others – but, beloved, hope is worth fighting for. May the Spirit of God surround you this season so that you might trust like Joseph and sing like Mary. The same hope they held is still alive today, transforming creation into

God’s will for justice and peace. As you prepare your heart for Christ’s arrival, may you make room for God’s presence, and may our actions reflect God’s hope for humanity.

Amen.