

Don't be afraid

Please don't misunderstand me. The Christmas story is not a childhood fantasy, a concocted mixture of a little



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prince who grows up in poverty, is rescued from obscurity to become a handsome king and lives happily ever after. Childhood doesn't last forever and happiness will not be found in any fantasy of power or wealth. Christmas is a fun holiday that ends our calendar year. Advent is the beginning of God's grace that never ends! In our world there is enough to fear, but in the coming of Jesus there is joy and hope.

We have two very different approaches to the story of Jesus' birth. Luke constructs his version around the four songs of Zachariah, Mary, the angels, and Simeon. (1:67-79; 1:46-55; 1:30-33; 2:29-32) Most people enjoy Luke's upbeat format, which is evidenced by our church Christmas music and dramas.

Matthew's version begins with a ponderous genealogy, leaves out those celebrating angels and the humor of the elderly priest Zachariah and his sweet little wife Elizabeth having a baby boy! Matthew leaves out the music and hits us with reality: an unmarried pregnant girl, her conflicted husband, and some unsettling dreams. Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells him to honor his marriage contract because the child Mary carries (not Joseph's child) is God's promised Messiah. The exotic magi from the east experience a dream from God warning them not to return to the murderous King Herod who will try to kill the baby. After Jesus' birth, Joseph has a dream warning him to flee the country because of King Herod's murderous plot. A few years later, after Herod's death, Joseph has another dream telling him it is safe to return home.

Both gospel versions are wonderful, and together, bring us a broader understanding of God reaching into our reality to make his love tangible. Matthew may be the darker version, but in that darkness we see the light of grace shining brightly! In Matthew's birth narrative, Joseph, rather than Mary, is the main character. In that culture Joseph and Mary were in the engagement period of their marriage contract when Mary became

pregnant. Mary would be considered an adulterous woman and Joseph could legally cancel the marriage contract.

But Matthew shows us a man of deep faith and gracious character as he struggles "because he didn't want to humiliate her" and "decided to call off their engagement quietly" (v. 19). Everything about this story spells disaster: Mary's pregnancy, Joseph's honor, social norms, the reputation of two families in a small village and the future of the unborn child. In Matthew's description we learn the meaning of true faith: Joseph was "a righteous man" (v. 19). No one could imagine such a story with a happy ending, but God is in the details. Were Joseph and Mary concerned, even afraid? Undoubtedly!

In the midst of his struggle "an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream" and said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (vv. 20-21).

Upside down describes Joseph's world. Life would never be the same and he could not begin to understand the consequences. Somehow this carpenter from a little Jewish village in a hostile Roman world was about to become a key figure in God's ultimate plan. Instead of being dazzled by the prospect of playing a significant part in God's plan, or being consumed by fear, Joseph realizes this calling isn't about him. God has chosen him to serve as earthly father to the Messiah. He is to love Mary and nurture this child as his own, and he can only do this by trusting God in everything.

As the gospel narratives unfold, do you see in Jesus a tenderness for children, compassion for social outcasts and those who are ill? Could these characteristics reflect the example of Joseph, the humble carpenter God chose to raise Jesus? Joseph is not a bit player in this drama of redemption. He is like any one of us when we dare to accept God's love and live out his grace in this broken world. When faith replaces fear and uncertainty, our lives can make a difference.

In his message of assurance to Joseph the angel references Isaiah 7:14 as a reminder that this Son "will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). Joseph, like everyone else, anticipated the coming

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"savior" as a kind of political warrior/champion and king like David. I wonder, did that picture fade as Joseph watched Jesus hunger to know the law and prophets? Were there clues that this child did not seem to fit the popular thinking in Israel?

What expectations does Matthew's account stir in your heart and mind this Christmas? King Herod wanted to kill any perceived challenge to his kingship. The religious establishment of Israel would finally, with the complicity of Rome, accomplish the violent death of Jesus.

What are we looking for in this unlikely story of God's Son coming into our world? Reactions to Jesus are still mixed: doubt, rejection, reimagining him to fit various philosophies and agendas. Honestly, most of us in the modern church want God to solve our problems, bless us with prosperity, or at least make life easier. We forget the promise that God is with us every day in Christ. Salvation is a finished fact. The conclusion for creation is already written and will not be changed. Christ will come again and take us home.

In the meantime God is with us. Examine the earthly life of Jesus and you find, repeatedly, in every challenge and in every heartache, the presence and promises of God. Every word of hope, every healing, every confrontation with religious burdens and every expression of God's grace reminds us we are never alone. Life teaches hard lessons, but our help and spiritual growth is found in the living. When we think evil is winning, or we cannot survive our circumstances, there is the powerful reminder of God's angel appearing to Joseph to tell him God is at work.

The nativity is only the beginning of what a world labels as impossible. A baby born of peasant parents in a town the world did not know, that child as a man became the embodiment of God's grace, and that man who stretched out his arms to die in our place on a cross...reminds us that in this fear-filled world we do not have to be afraid. In Christ, we are God's dear children.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.