

Encounters with Terrifying Joy

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

The Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018

Philippians 4:4-9/Luke 1:26-38

Brené Brown is research professor at the University of Houston. In this morning's modern lesson, you heard her talking to Oprah about why we might find joy terrifying. Dr. Brown said, "I believe you have to walk through vulnerability to get to courage, therefore, my motto right now is "Courage over comfort."

Courage over comfort.

Sometimes it takes more courage to be happy than to be depressed. Joy requires us to find a new way of being in the world, and that can be scary. External circumstances can make us happy or unhappy for a little while, but joy is ultimately an inside job. In life, we don't get to choose what cards we are dealt, but we do get to decide how to play them.



That is why joy can be so terrifying. We all have been hurt by life. Some of us more than others, and there still are unpleasant events to come. This fact keeps us from getting our hopes up too much, but **you can't prepay misery**. Keeping a lid on joy isn't a preventative for pain. It is just a lost opportunity to celebrate the good in spite of it.

Bill and I wanted to have children back in a day when gay couples never thought they could get married, let alone have children. We thought we'd be good foster parents and then, perhaps, be allowed to adopt. Texas wasn't so keen on that idea, so we decided to go the artificial insemination route. After

several tries, we were five weeks pregnant when the public hospital called to tell us they had a baby for us to foster.

With one baby in arms and another on the way, I think we could understand how Mary felt. Having a baby is good news with great joy, **and** it is utterly terrifying.



All the Advent and Christmas stories in the Gospels have one thing in common. Every one of them start with the same words: Fear not!

I don't mean to be sacrilegious, but may I suggest that if an angel shows up and starts by telling you not to be afraid, you might want to sit down? The news may be good, but it may be good in the worst possible way.



Between 1875 and 1883, there was a professional thief whose very name struck fear in the hearts of travelers as he terrorized Wells Fargo stagecoaches. From San Francisco to New York, his name became synonymous with danger on the frontier. He struck 29 times. Amazingly, he robbed them all without firing a single shot. Black Bart used fear to paralyze his victims.

Fear can rob us of the opportunities for joy.

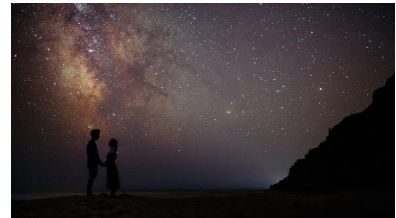
Mary could've been paralyzed by her fear of what Joseph might think, or what her parents would do, or what her neighbors might say. Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Some months before, Joseph had gotten up his courage and gone to Mary's home. There, clearing his throat, this strong,



gentle man asked Mary's father if he might have his daughter's hand in marriage.

Following a custom that already was centuries old, Mary's father would have placed her hand in Joseph's, then placed his hand over theirs, and said, "Thou art betrothed, and peace be with you." They would reply softly, "And also with you."

Perhaps, like young lovers everywhere, they went out under the stars to plan and dream. Then, one night, perhaps several months later, there came a knock at Joseph's door. Answering it, he was surprised to find Mary and her father standing there.

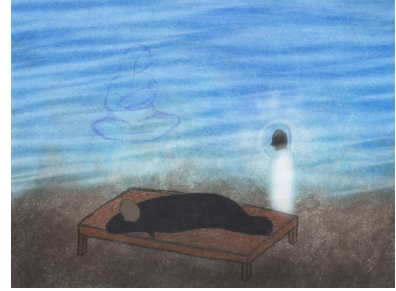


Naturally, he invited them into his home, which also served as his carpenter's shop. Quickly clearing a place, he invited them to sit. As the light from the lamp fell across Mary's face, Joseph noticed that she looked pale. He was about to ask if she were ill when her father spoke, "I bring you words that do not honor me or you, for Mary is with child."

I wonder how Joseph felt when he heard that. Did it seem as if his world had broken in two and fallen away? That night, the hills around Nazareth must have heard the sound of a strong man weeping.

After Mary and her father left, after the shock and anger wore off, Joseph decided he would go early the next day to Mary's father and tell him that he did not want to further embarrass Mary. So, he would divorce her quietly. It would require two witnesses, but he had a couple of friends who would do it and keep quiet.

Joseph was a good man. The law allowed him to publicly humiliate Mary. He could have had her stoned in the doorway of her father's house. His dreams in shambles, all he wanted now was to get on with his life. His mind made up, he worked like a mad man until, at last, the oil in the lamp burned out, and he dropped onto his pallet exhausted. As Joseph slept, he dreamed that an angel said to him, "Joseph, fear not to take Mary as your wife because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."



The angel said the same thing to Joseph that the angel had said to Mary: Fear not.

Now, in those days, the job of a carpenter required that he go out and chop a tree himself and then single-handedly haul it back to the shop, remove the limbs and bark, and saw it by hand without benefit of power tools or even the sharp edge of steel.

"Fear not" wouldn't have been the first thing you thought to say when you looked at Joseph. What would cause someone like Joseph to be afraid? Perhaps the nocturnal messenger from God thought that, like all of us, even strong Joseph was afraid of what people would say when they found out the baby was not his.

Maybe the angel was trying to say, "Joseph, don't be so afraid of what others might think." The messenger probably knew humans well enough to know that, regardless of how confident we may seem, there is a layer of insecurity just beneath the surface ready to erupt and render us irrationally angry. Maybe the angel knew that, when Joseph heard the child would be One sent from God, he would be afraid that the job was too big for him to handle. Sure, he knew how

to build a table and chairs as well as anyone around, but what did he know about rearing a child who was sent to redeem humanity?

“Fear not” the angel said to Joseph. It is probably what any messenger from God would say to you and me, but listen to what else the angel said to Joseph: “Fear not, Joseph, because that which is conceived is of the Holy Spirit ...” My friends, I don't know what fears you are facing this Christmas, but hear what God would say to you today: “Don't be afraid, because in you has been planted the seed of God.

Take the risk to know the joy. Don't hold back, but, by faith, do as Mary did and offer your life to God with the words, 'Let it be.'”



The prophet said, “They shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.”

Whatever this new year holds, we need not fear, because we do not face it alone. God is with us. It may be that the very challenge that creates fear in you, is pregnant with Holy Spirit possibilities, so why not embrace the terrifying joy?

About a thousand years before this all happened to Joseph and Mary, an Egyptian Pharaoh named Tutankhamun died and was buried in the Valley of the Kings. In his tomb, they put all the things they thought he would need in the next life, including a basket of wheat.



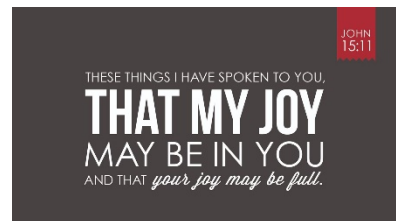
After that tomb was discovered, they planted some of the seeds of wheat, and they sprouted and grew. Imagine that. After laying dormant for 3,000 years of darkness, the spark of life remained in them.

There is, in any situation, the spark of life. Every circumstance is pregnant with divine possibilities, but, like Joseph and Mary, we must choose to respond with joy rather than fear.

Sometimes it seems angels come out only at night when life is dark, stress-filled, or gloomy. Could it be that angels are like stars, that they are **always there**, all around us, but it is only when the sky grows darkest that we are able to see them? It is no coincidence that Christmas comes at the time of year when the nights are the longest.

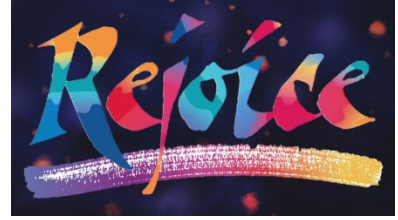
Joseph might have responded with fear and anger, and who would have blamed him? His ears might have been so filled with self-pity that he missed the message from God completely. He may have had a few choice words to say to the Almighty.

In the end, Joseph and Mary both chose the path of joy. We know that because we know what kind of person Jesus grew up to be. When he came to the end of his life, facing betrayal, arrest, torture, and death, his last gift to his disciples was to *offer them his joy*, not because of the circumstances but despite them.



Now, in case you are wondering what happened with Black Bart, it turns out he wasn't anything to be afraid of either. When the hood came off, they didn't find a blood thirsty bandit; they found a mild-mannered pharmacist from Decatur, Illinois named Charles E. Boles. He never fired a shot because he was afraid to carry a loaded gun.

Much of what we fear never happens, though some of it does. Even so, why do we let it rob us of Joy? **REJOICE** while you can. There will be plenty of time for sorrow.



Maybe it can't be Christmas every day, but, with a little courage and faith, we all can make it come around more often.