

“Emmanuel, God with Us!”
Matthew 1: 18-25

Joy is a decision!

Today is the third Sunday of Advent and the theme of this week is ‘joy’ so even the color of the candle is pink. We are joyful when things go well or when we get what we want. Juhee and I were happy when we heard the news that our green card application was approved. We were joyful when Joy came to live with us. But joy is not just an emotion we experience but it can be our response to life. It has been said, “Joy is a decision, a really brave one, about how you are going to respond to life.” That means we can choose to be happy and joyful even when life does not go as we planned.

Joseph chose to be joyful by accepting the message of joy from the angel, even though the situation didn’t look good for him. While Joseph, along with the angel, seem to be the main characters in this story, he was more in the background. The author of the Gospel of Matthew did not really give us details about how Joseph felt or what he did, but we all know he was in an unhappy situation.

Imagine you are Joseph. You are engaged to Mary and your wedding day was coming. A few weeks ago, you heard a rumor that Mary was pregnant. You hoped that it was just a false rumor but you just found out that Mary is actually pregnant. You are 100% sure that the baby is not yours. How would you feel? Anger, betrayal, resentment, maybe, shame, but I am pretty sure that you would not be happy or joyful. In this unpleasant situation, Joseph could have chosen revenge against Mary for what she had done. Joseph was chagrined but he was a noble person so he determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

Of course, that didn’t mean that Joseph did not have anything to worry about. Mary’s condition also brought disgrace upon him. He needed to worry about his damaged reputation and honor. He also had to think about the dowry his family paid and how to get it back. But most of all, he must have worried about the well-being of Mary whom he loved. There was nothing to rejoice about in this situation. It’s a terrible situation for everyone. Can there be joy?

Angel brought the good news of Joy

In this messy situation, the angel delivered a message to Joseph.

“While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke to him in a dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.”

The angel’s message intervened in Joseph’s situation by letting him know that Mary’s pregnancy was part of God’s plan and things would be alright. However, it was still Joseph’s choice whether he would accept this good news or not.

There is a story. “A man named Jack was walking along a steep cliff one day, when he accidentally got too close to the edge and fell off. On the way down he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror saw that the canyon fell straight down for more than a thousand feet.

He couldn’t hang onto the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff, so Jack began yelling for help. “HELP! HELP! Is anyone up there? “HELP!”

He yelled for a long time, but no one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice. "Jack, Jack. Can you hear me?" "Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!"

"I can see you, Jack. Are you all right?" "Yes, but who are you, and where are you?"

The stranger answer, "I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere."

"The Lord? You mean, GOD?"

"That's Me."

Jack desperately yelled, "God, please help me! I promise if, you'll get me down from here, I'll stop sinning. I'll be a really good person. I'll serve You for the rest of my life."

God responded, "Easy on the promises, Jack. Let's get you off from there; then we can talk. Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully."

Jack answered, "I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do."

"Okay. Let go of the branch."

"What?" Jack answered.

"I said, let go of the branch. Just trust Me. Let go."

There was a long silence. Finally, Jack yelled, "HELP! HELP! IS ANYONE ELSE UP THERE?"

This is a funny story but it certainly captures some truth. Even God cannot change disbelief. Sometimes, we ask for God's help but we refuse God's guidance when it doesn't match our expectation. Angels can deliver good news to us but it's still on us whether we trust it or not. Joseph chose to believe the angel messenger that things would be alright and it was ok to go with the flow on this one. Instead of giving into the worry of what might happen, Joseph accepted the good news from the angel and his acceptance was a gift for the whole of humanity. Because of his acceptance of the good news of joy from the angel, we also enjoy the same gift given to us, Emmanuel, God is with us.

Emmanuel, God is with Us!

Even in a terrible situation, Joseph chose to be joyful by accepting the message given to him. Like Joseph, we can choose to be joyful and happy, no matter what. I believe everyone know the song, "Don't worry! Be Happy!" Its lyrics say, "In every life we have some trouble But when you worry you make it double. Don't worry, be happy!... Like good little children, don't worry, be happy! Now listen to what I said, in your life expect some trouble. When you worry you make it double, But don't worry, be happy, be happy now!" I am not a good singer so I could not sing this song for you but you get the message. It has been said, "Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy." So, don't worry but choose to be happy and joyful.

The very reason we can rejoice is Emmanuel, God with us! As the Apostle Paul said, "If God is for us, who can be against us!"(Romans 8:31) If God is with us, who or what can be against us!" So, whenever you are in trouble or expect some troubles, keep repeating, "Emmanuel, God is with us! "Emmanuel, God is with us!" This simple word can give us strength to endure and eyes to see blessings in disguise.

Some of us may think "Can this simple word really have such power?" A pious monk traveled from town to town and a woman heard about him. Her child was very ill so she wanted to get help from this holy man to pray for the healing of her child. When the monk arrived at her home, the town's people had already gathered in her house. The monk kneeled and placed his hand on the child and prayed. Then, one man in the crowd shouted, "That's ridiculous! Even medicine didn't heal the boy. Do you really think your prayer can heal the boy?" The pious

monk stared at him and yelled, “You know nothing about prayer! You idiot!” The man was so angry that he blushed. When he was about to insult the monk back, the wise monk smiled at him and said, “if my simple word can upset you, couldn’t my prayer also have the power for healing? On that day, the monk healed not only the boy but also the man.

We lit the candle of joy today. Regardless of the situations we now face, there are always things we can appreciate and things we can rejoice in. We can choose joy over worry because God is with us. We can choose happiness over sorrow because God is with us. Emmanuel, God is with us! I hope you choose to be joyful and be messengers of joy. Amen.