

Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Advent “Messy and Magnificent” Reverend Amy Zalk Larson Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Some disruptions in our life feel like holy gifts of God. A long-anticipated child is born healthy. No one sleeps. The house is chaotic. And your heart is full.

A new pet brings joy and piles of hair, warmth, and mess. You soak up the love and breathe more deeply, when you're not choking on all that hair.

You start a new activity at school or in the community. It's a ton of work and you're tired, tired but happy.

You read *Me and White Supremacy* or participate in the ELCA study on racism. Now you're reexamining your whole life, all your thinking. It is hard and liberating.

Some disruptions are unholy - not of God: the cancer diagnosis, a global pandemic, the accident, the betrayal, the earthquake, mass shootings.

And sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. The disruption in Joseph's life is very holy, very much caused by God. Yet it's hard for Joseph to see that at first. We're told that "Joseph is a *righteous* man, which is to say a man devoted to God and concerned with clean, ethical living."¹ As author Debie Thomas puts it, "We can assume this is not a guy who likes to make waves, or draw attention, or get too close to controversy. He wants an orderly life. He's honest and hard-working. He follows the rules. He practices justice and fairness, and all he wants in exchange is a *normal*, uncomplicated life."²

But that's not what happens. Instead, Joseph gets some very disruptive news. His fiancée is pregnant. He knows for sure that he is not the father, and there are no good options. If he draws attention to Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might be stoned to death. If he dismisses her quietly, how will she support herself? If he marries her, then *her* son will become his heir, first born in his household. He'll be tainted by scandal, and by Mary's strange, and maybe blasphemous claim, that the baby's dad is somehow God.

As if things weren't complicated enough, Joseph receives word in a dream that this is all of God and that he, Joseph, has an important role to play. God calls him to take an active role in this whole thing! Debie Thomas describes Joseph's predicament so well. As she puts it: God calls Joseph, a righteous man with an impeccable reputation, straight into societal shame, scandal, and controversy. God calls him to reorder everything he thinks he knows about justice and goodness, to em-

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2484-into-the-mess>

² Ibid.

brace a mess he has not created, love a woman whose story he doesn't understand, protect a baby he didn't father, accept an heir who is not his son. God calls Joseph, a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy, to choose what he fears and dreads most: the fraught, the complicated, the suspicious.

No wonder that the angel Gabriel's first words to Joseph were, "Do not be afraid." They're words we also need in our complicated lives. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid when God's work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your assumptions about what is holy and good, when God calls you to stand alongside the scandalous, the suspected, the shamed, when God asks you to love something or someone more than your own reputation. Do not be afraid to play your part, even when nothing feels clear. The way forward will appear, one step at a time.

Joseph wakes from sleep, takes one step and then another. He marries his pregnant fiancée. He honors the space her body needs to do the holy work of birthing Emmanuel. He claims the child as his own and names him Jesus. Then, later, things get even more complicated. A power hungry, money hungry emperor orders everyone to go home and get counted because he wants more taxes from them - a pretty unholy disruption. But Mary is very pregnant. The journey will be perilous. Bethlehem will be crowded and chaotic. What will they do? One step at a time, the way appears. Every step of the way, Joseph and Mary are accompanied by God who brings life amidst all the disruptions of our lives.

After Jesus is born, another powerful man stirs things up even more. King Herod hears *a child has been born King of the Jews*. He's threatened. He's thirsty for more power. He orders the death of all infants under two years old - a most unholy disruption. How will Joseph protect this newborn child? He has another dream, warning him to take his family and flee to Egypt. Again, one step at a time, accompanied by the holy every step of the way.

Joseph's life is disrupted mightily many, many times. His dreams and plans, his understandings and assumptions, upended time and time again. Yet through all the chaos and complication, Joseph experiences the good news, the good news that God is with us. He discovers that things don't need to be in order and perfect for God to show up. Rather, the mess is the place where God is born, the mess is the place where God provides, the mess is where God gives us new life.

Joseph's story is hard and holy, messy and magnificent. All of our lives are. Your life is hard and holy, messy and magnificent. One step at a time, a way will appear. And you are accompanied every step of the way.

Do not be afraid. Emmanuel is born. God is with us.