

A walk in the dark: Joseph in Advent

Advent Series 2009

Sermon at the First Mennonite Church, Vineland, ON by Carol Penner

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Texts: Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38

There's a gap between these two stories we are reading, and I want to talk about that gap. We just read two accounts of the announcement of Jesus' birth. One is from the gospel of Luke. There we hear that before Mary was even pregnant, she received a visit from the angel Gabriel. In Matthew's gospel account, we hear Joseph's story, where we pick up the story a little later. We find out that Mary has already been pregnant for months.

There's a gap here. There's a gap of a couple of months between the time Mary finds out about the baby she is to bear, and the time when Joseph finds out about her pregnancy, and has the dream. So here we have a time, several months at least, where Joseph is in the dark. It's a gap time, where Joseph first of all doesn't know what is going to happen (and Mary does), and then a gap time when he knows about the pregnancy, and he makes plans based on what he thinks has happened.

Mary didn't have to live in the dark, on some levels. She was told right up front about the baby, and she agreed to be his mother. "Let it be to me according to your will." We heard about that in the song we sang today about "The Angel Gabriel".

I can just imagine Mary, after the angel has left, as she's laying there thinking of everything that has just happened to her, and turning over the story in her mind....suddenly she sits bolt upright, "I forgot to ask, who is going to tell Joseph?" She was probably hoping that Gabriel had paid Joseph a visit the same night. I can picture her the next day looking at Joseph, wondering if he was going to mention the angel visitor. But he just talked about his regular work-day, the carpentry jobs that came in. She must have wondered, "When is Gabriel going to tell him?" Day in, day out, she waited. She didn't want Joseph to be in the dark, but...what were the chances of him believing her? This was a pretty unusual, a pretty far-fetched story to be telling. "It was the Holy spirit!"

But day by day passed, and Joseph continued in the dark. How hard it must have been for Mary...not for Joseph because he was in the dark and he didn't even know he was in the dark. But for Mary...she must have agonized, "Should I tell him, or not?" Her prayers were probably pretty insistent, "Lord, you have to tell Joseph today. Please! Amen!"

And then the time came where her pregnancy was clear to everyone. Joseph did not understand. Did he even talk to Mary? Did he find out about the pregnancy from her? Or from a customer who came in, with a juicy bit of gossip? Or maybe his mother told him, after hearing it at the well. We don't know how Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. We do know that he decides to divorce her. He feels

betrayed, he feels that he has been made a fool of. He feels that the relationship must end, and he resolves to do that.

In the Orthodox tradition there are a lot of paintings about biblical subjects. In paintings about the birth of Jesus, there is sometimes a small picture of Joseph sitting looking glum and dejected with someone telling him something. He is hearing bad news that Mary is pregnant.

Mary must have been so despondent when she heard that Joseph was planning to divorce her. The angel hadn't said anything about Joseph...maybe she was supposed to be a single parent, a terrible fate in that time and culture. She was walking in the dark. Perhaps this was a time where Mary had to fling herself on God..."God help me!" Maybe it was a time where she realized that she had to totally commit herself to God.

What was that time like for Joseph? How difficult was it for him to end his engagement? We don't know. Did he turn to God? What was Joseph praying..."Lord, be merciful to Mary, even though she is a sinner. Help me to get over her, help me to find a woman I can trust."

And then he had his dream. He's told that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit. And that they are to parent a child who is a Saviour for their people, who will save them from their sins. So the light was suddenly turned on. Now he knew what he was dealing with. Now he knew what Mary had been dealing with.

I wonder if Joseph or Mary ever prayed, "Why, Lord? Why couldn't you have told us at the same time? Why did we have to go through that period of darkness. It was so hard for us! Why?"

Darkness, not knowing. An inability to see what is in front of your face. It's hard to live in the darkness...it's scary. We hate living with uncertainty and not knowing what is going to happen.

Darkness is a basic primal human fear. Do you ever dream about darkness? I have had recurring dreams for years about darkness. About driving and needing to turn in a certain direction...but it's entirely dark. I'm looking and looking and I can't see a thing. Or I've had dreams where I'm looking for something but I can't open my eyes to see. I'm looking and looking but my eyes are closed. Those dreams are always gripping and frustrating.

I think we dream about darkness because we have had scary experiences in the darkness. I remember driving home from Pennsylvania on a twisty road through the big hills, late at night all by myself, and there suddenly out of nowhere the lane is closed and I had to swerve quite dramatically or crash into a place where they were repairing a bridge. No warning whatsoever, and in the darkness, you couldn't see that coming soon enough. If I had been driving in the daytime I would have had no problem with that turn, but in the night in the darkness, I felt my life flash before my eyes, and it took an hour for my heart to slow down.

Maybe you have scary darkness stories...not being able to find someone in the dark, not being able to find your way home in the dark. Darkness throughout time has been associated with danger, because we can't see our enemies, and we can lose our way in the darkness, we can fall into unexpected traps, and hurt ourselves in the dark.

We use the word picture "walking in the dark" to describe periods of our lives where we don't know what is going to happen next. We want to be able to see what's coming. We want to see the whole picture. Especially when things are very difficult. We want to know what's going to happen, and if we can't we feel scared, like walking in the dark.

When I worked as a chaplain, I often had to sit with people in times of darkness. Times when they were sitting in a waiting room not knowing if their loved one was going to live or to die. Sometimes people would be sitting there thinking and thinking and then they would just explode with the comment, "I can't take this!!!!!" Especially as hours turned to days, and days turned to weeks, and someone's life still hovered in the balance, they'd say, "I can't take this not knowing. I can deal with whatever happens, I can deal with death, I can deal with life, but I can't deal with this not knowing." When people finally got bad news, it was hard and they were grieving, but they still often said, "Now we know what we're dealing with." Knowing bad news was better than wondering whether you were waiting for bad news or good news.

Walking in the dark is excruciating. I met a woman named Alice on my recent trip to Ukraine who had a long walking in the dark experience. She was a teenager when the Germans invaded Ukraine in the Second World War...she and her family welcomed the Germans, who brought freedom to their Mennonite village, opening long-closed churches and allowing the German-speaking Mennonites quite a bit of leeway. She was able to work in the post office, because she knew so many languages, and could translate for the Germans. The occupation lasted many months, and then the Russian troops made a big surge to recapture Ukraine. As Russian forces advanced, the Germans retreated, and along with them went the Mennonites. Alice and her mother and younger sister (their father and brothers had been killed in the war) also retreated, as they did not want to live in the Soviet Union after all the suffering they had been through. However there were not enough vehicles for all the German evacuees. So you can imagine the picture...the Russian soldiers advancing in vehicles, the German army retreating in vehicles and trains, and thousands and thousands of people walking, trying to keep up with the German forces.

As Alice and her sister and mom walked, suddenly a car stopped next to them, "Alice!" called a young German soldier who knew her, "Hop in, we'll give you a ride." Alice quickly asked whether her mother and sister could also come, but there was no room for them. Alice was not going to go, but her mother said, "Get in the car. We will catch up with you later." So Alice got in the car. But her mother and sister did not catch up with her at the next town, they were captured by the Russian army; they were not allowed to return to their village but were sent to Siberia. Alice knew nothing about this, she just kept hoping they would be reunited as she retreated with the army. She looked and looked and looked for them, hoping against hope, but it was the beginning of a very dark time. She didn't know

where anyone in her family was, and she had to make her way in the world alone as a teenager. She said, "I would rather have died with my family, than be alone without them." She eventually emigrated to Canada, and after eight years, through the friend of a friend, she heard some news that her sister and mother were still alive in Siberia. It took ten more years but Alice was eventually able to sponsor her mother and sister to come to Canada.

Her mother and sister had suffered in the Soviet Union. When they arrived her mother told Alice, "You were sent on ahead to prepare a way for us. We would never have reached freedom unless you had gone ahead, and sponsored us." For Alice, a light dawned when her mother said these words. Now she understood the path that she had walked.

We don't know why we go through periods of darkness. Many faithful people experience darkness. Joseph...the other Joseph...the one from the Old Testament, lived in the dark for a long time. He didn't know where his life was going. Can you imagine being sold as a slave into Egypt, and then as if that wasn't bad enough, the slave in Egypt gets thrown in prison for years! Talk about walking in the dark.

The prophets had to walk in the dark, they didn't know what was going to happen. Jesus himself had a dark night in the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples had a dark road to walk when Jesus died...they didn't know what was going to happen next. What we find out in scripture is that lots of people have to walk in the dark.

Where are we walking in the dark? Will I get accepted into the school I applied to? Will the medical test results come back positive or negative? Will my job be the one that's cut? Will my marriage survive this crisis? Will my company be the one that goes bankrupt? Will I ever find a job? Will my friend and I be reconciled? How will global warming change our climate?

We live in the dark sometimes. And it's a mystery why God sends us these times. We don't know why Joseph had to live in the dark, why he received no angel visitor.

We can see that Joseph and Mary both relied on God in the dark. Mary, even though she probably knew that Joseph was going to divorce her, decided to keep the baby (even in those times there were ways of making pregnancies end). She decided she could go through with this even if everyone deserted her...she would rely on God. And Joseph, even when he was walking in the dark, and thought Mary had been unfaithful, didn't become vindictive and spiteful. He was a righteous man, and resolved to do the right thing, which was to divorce Mary quietly. Both Mary and Joseph relied on God in that dark time.

The darkness ended for Joseph with that dream, but he was only given a certain amount of light. Only as much light as he could absorb. The first dream he had didn't end with the question, "And have you ever thought of moving to Egypt?" Maybe that would have been too much for poor Joseph...one last straw as he ran running from the scene, "That baby has too much baggage!"

In the same way, Gabriel didn't tell Mary anything about the circumstances of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. She wasn't told anything about Jesus' career path, she wasn't told anything about Calvary. It was when her baby was safe in her arms, when she was in the temple, that Simeon said, "And a sword will pierce your soul also." "What does that mean?" she must have wondered. Mary was in the dark about that statement for Jesus' whole life.

Walking in the dark. Waiting for light. Advent...it's a time for casting ourselves on God, a time for turning to God in prayer, a time for trusting that God will give us the light we need, and that God will protect us from too much light. Even in the darkest parts of your lives, God will walk with you this advent season.