

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

December 18, 2016; the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-17; Psalm 80:1-7; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.

Do Not Be Afraid

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, in year A of our three year lectionary cycle, we have what is called the annunciation to Joseph.

Joseph did not sign up for what happened.
He was blindsided by the events as they unfolded.
After all, Mary was going to be his wife and the mother of his children, after they were married.
But then he learns that she is with child---not his; he still loves her, we can tell because he did not want her to be in anymore trouble than she was, so he would quietly end the engagement.

But then the angel comes, in a dream...and cannot be ignored: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."

Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid.

Everything is going to be more difficult than you imagined. The life that you envisioned for yourself and your family is not going to be as you had hoped.

Joseph is the saint for anyone who has been going along in life, and then something happens, or doesn't happen, and circumstances

change...and you have to keep on
living...living through it, living into it.

It wasn't what Joseph wanted; he could not have even
imagined it...that his Mary would bear the child who
would be called God-with-us?

These angel-vision dreams are pretty powerful to get a
person to go along with that.

Being a person of faith, then or now, is not a guarantee
that all will go as planned...in fact it probably won't.

For those who are open to angels and visions and God
making a slight nudge here and there in ways that
we aren't sure if it God, but probably so, for
those who are open, we are God's
co-creators of life...not life as

we wish it could be but we are those who communicate the life of God, the love of
God, the reality of God with us...in the places and circumstance where we find
ourselves.

Following what we know of God, believe about God,

know of the way of Jesus in the world, we can be brave like Joseph, not
afraid, because like Joseph,

when we do as we know we are called to
do, there is grace...there is joy...there
is hope...even in the darkness,
even in a dark stable, manger, cave...the
light was born.

So we learn from Joseph, to be open to how grace might
show up, even if it seems far off.

One example that came up for me this week, has to do with how we as this church
interact with our neighborhood.

I have a vision for us as a community to be more of a
neighborhood center...not that people will

necessarily come to church here or be
Christians...

but that we can be Christ to those who live around us.

...inviting them to participate in our activities as they find appealing.

I kind of had a plan for this...being welcoming of what the neighbors are interested in...we have hosted a neighborhood civic gathering recently...we hosted our Neighborhood Night Out last summer...we host many concerts. And checking in with them about their lives...what matters to them.

But I'm starting to have a Joseph moment, in that recent
feedback from neighbors is focused on the
littering they see around.

Because we are here doing things, helping people,
hosting people, we are seen by some as bringing
more people, cars, and trash around than is
desirable.

This sort of feedback came for more than one person
just this week.

This may seem like not that big a deal...but in away, this
is at the heart of life for us as a church.

We are connecting with our neighbors but not as I had
envisioned it.

What will the grace be?

We have a great opportunity to be loving to those who
see us as a problem.

We can be Christ to them, while still maintaining our
integrity and standing up for what we know God is
called us to do and be for others.

The matter of litter is a small thing when we consider the
issues of our times.

And hey, we can all agree that we don't like seeing litter
around.

But what about other matters?

We had a number of calls, emails, about the flamingos
with the red ribbons, which we had up for World
AIDS Day, showing our care and support for
those living with HIV and that we
remember and mourn all who have
died.

Not everyone liked those out there.

And the signs with the safety pins---we received one
phone call challenging us -- why do we have them
out-- accused us being for Democrats saying
these are Democratic signs...which of
course they are not, but represent that
this is a place of safety and
peace for all.

I have to say...I think we are headed in the right direction
when some people don't like what we are doing.

When we are welcoming all, and saying that everyone,
no matter who they are or where they come from,
are our neighbors...in the wider community as
well as next door.

Very well known story of our faith tradition, asks the question...who is my neighbor?
The Samaritan who would go on to be known as good...knew the
answer...everyone. And isn't it the case that so often those who have suffered,
been excluded, are most compassionate to others? Our church as always been on
the edge and for a very long time, has welcomed those who were not welcomed in
other places. We are like the Samaritan...one who understood suffering because he
has suffered.

Our next banner, probably going up in the middle of
January, says first in Spanish,

"No importa de donde eras, estamos contentos que seas nuestro vecino."

Then the same phrase in English, "No matter where you

are from, we are glad you're our neighbor."
Then under the English, it says the same thing in
Arabic.

If that upsets people -- so be it --- if
that puts us in danger of being criticized or
becoming a target for people's hate, well,
we are in good company with Joseph and Mary who
walked away from the norms of their society to
answer God's call...to birth
salvation...light...grace for all people.

This Advent, how are we preparing for what we await?
Everytime we help someone; every time we provide
shelter as we are hosting 34 women through
CARITAS, everytime we affirm the dignity of
every person...
we are Advent people...preparing for the One who
embodies all that is God -- Emmanuel, God-with-us.
The angel appeared to Joseph and said, do not be
afraid to take Mary as your wife.

God says to us today, *do not be afraid to take on what
will give birth to love.*

Do not be afraid to upset some people.

*Do not be afraid to go against convention, if convection
is in the way of God doing a new and beautiful
thing.*

*Do not be afraid no matter what your circumstances
are...no matter how challenging the situation
is...because, God tells us, I will be with you.*

What have the Joseph moments been in your life?
Where do you see them now...a situation that is not what

you expected but contains seeds of hope?

Today we enter the final week of Advent for this

year...but we take from this season, a sense of our

identity as Advent people, who are awake to

God, preparing for God, preparing a way, as we wait for
God...to come to us...as we

wait to welcome our Emmanuel

once again. Amen.