

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI**  
**Advent 4 + December 22, 2019**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + Matthew 1:18-25**

It's an old saying that the Gospel is intended not to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth does just that by plunging us into a huge family drama, right off the bat.

Here the focus is on Joseph. The story of Jesus on earth begins with an pre-marital pregnancy and Mary's fiancé is not the father. Imagine Joseph's shock, consternation, and disbelief. How could something like this happen to a faithful, law-abiding man who worked hard as a carpenter to build up enough financial stability so that he could finally enter into marriage and support a family? How could this happen?

They must have each shared this news with their families. Imagine the uproar it caused. Mary's family must have been pleased at the match, with her engaged to a man who promised stability and a future. Joseph's family must have been happy for him to find a good, pious young woman such as Mary. But this news threw everything into a shambles.

Joseph was in a terrible predicament. His trust in Mary must have been shattered. His dreams of their future up in smoke. Everything he had worked toward in his adult life, all gone. He was also shattered because he knew the penalty in Jewish culture at the time for a woman in Mary's situation: Death by public stoning, as a way of deterring other young women from doing what Mary had supposedly done. The law in

Deuteronomy actually says that if a man marries a girl who is claimed to be a virgin, and then finds that she is not, “they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father’s house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death.”

But Joseph could not bring himself to do this. “Being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly.” The verb in that sentence, “to dismiss,” has the meaning of loosening, letting one go, or even setting one free, in the sense of releasing someone from an obligation, even to the point of forgiving them – not angrily sending them packing.

But chances are that if Joseph had dismissed her quietly as he’d planned, Mary and the baby would have met the same fate. Where could she go and not face that death sentence? Word traveled quickly. But God’s plan was perfect: Just as Joseph was about to do this, NOW the angel appears.

Angels appear in the Bible at all the crucial moments, when all hope seems lost. My favorite angel story is in Numbers 22, when a donkey essentially saves the people of Israel from destruction. The king of an enemy country sends a man named Balaam to go out and curse the Israelites, which would ensure that the king’s army would destroy them. God tells him not to go, but he sets out anyway. At some point the donkey suddenly will go no further. An angel has blocked the way, but only the donkey can see it. Balaam repeatedly beats the donkey but it refuses to move and finally lies down right there in the road. Finally God speaks to Balaam through the donkey. Then is able to see

the angel, and does what God tells him. (There is a donkey on our bulletin cover, and I think this is why.)

The angel explains everything to Joseph, including the very reason that Jesus is being born into the world. He is obedient just as Mary was in Luke's gospel. In all these, stories, darkness plays a big role. A sudden turn of events plunges the central character into darkness. Balaam has no idea why the donkey won't go any further. Mary, engaged, finds herself pregnant and not by Joseph; Joseph, engaged, finds Mary pregnant, not by him. Everything was suddenly thrown into doubt.

Yet, God was at work in the darkness, because must have darkness in order to discern light. Light can come only out of darkness. We would not know light if there wasn't darkness to distinguish it from. We have just experienced 16 full hours of darkness at the winter solstice, from 4:27 pm to 7:27 am. The good news of the winter solstice is that, minute by minute, light is added to each day until 6 months from now when we will have 16 hours of light.

As one wise liturgical scholar has said, "Darkness is part of the wardrobe of God." God wore the robe of darkness in the very beginning, even before time began. Yet even in that darkness, the triune God was there. In the Bible, angels always appear out of darkness or in dark situations. Think of the angel on the night of Jesus' birth, coming out of the dark night sky. This great brightness in the midst of the dark night was what terrified the shepherds.

God becomes known to us in the midst of our darkness as God did in Joseph's darkest hour. Love has come down from heaven for us, to lighten our darkness. Darkness is the path we have been walking these last four weeks. What we have learned during in Advent is that God is present in the darkness as well as in the light. Psalm 80 calls to us in the midst of our own darkness—death, depression, divorce; addiction, alienation, anger: Restore us, O God of hosts! Let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

In the midst of whatever darkness you are experiencing in life, remember that God is fully present there. With that in mind we can prepare with joy to celebrate the day that changed the history of the world. The hymn that we are about to sing says it all: "My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great / and my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait."

We have been waiting in the darkness, waiting, and waiting. Now, the day is almost here. Look toward Jesus Christ. Everything is about to change!