

When You're Afraid, Take My Hand – Isaiah 41:5-10

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Fifty-six years ago today, my mother gave birth to me in our Iowa hometown hospital. It was cold, of course, and snowing in the middle of the night when little Matthew Ray was born.

That's a cute story, but nothing like the story of my wife, Laura, being born on Christmas day several years less than 56 years ago in the backseat of her parents' car.

When she and I had our first conversation the week of March 10, 2024, there were two long stories she shared: One was about an experience she had in Europe when she toured with Up with People during her college days (hilarious) and the other was her birth story—somewhat humorous too but also breathtaking. She had me after hearing those stories.

Anyway, when I was born on December 21, 1969, I don't know what the fears were—if any—for my mother and dad. They were seven years into their young marriage—both teachers making modest salaries. Did they fear the challenges of being parents for the first time, of supporting a family as they struggled to get ahead? Did they fear what I would face in the world as the turbulent 60s were turning into the turbulent 70s? I'll have to ask my mom when I see her next week.

I do know, however, that in that small town where my mom still resides they were surrounded by friends—teacher friends, church friends, other friends they had made in that community—many of whom were living the same experiences. They also had family in close proximity to them.

They were surrounded by people who came alongside them and walked with them in their new journey of parenthood.

Surely, I've preached on my birthday before over the last two and a half decades, right? But somehow, preaching on these scripture texts on my birthday has brought into focus for me the fear that can come, in addition to the great joy, in the moments when you become a parent for the first time.

Consider Joseph and his call by the angel to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, after she had received a similar angelic visit announcing that she would give birth to the Messiah. And when he awoke from his dream, instead of dismissing Mary quietly, Joseph decides to indeed remain by Mary's side as her husband.

Imagine the fear that came with that decision, though. "Joseph had found himself in a devastating predicament. In first-century Jewish life, in Mary and Joseph's world, the news of Mary's pregnancy would not have gone down well. Their "engagement" was not just a social arrangement. According to Jewish law, this was a legally binding contract. They had not yet set up housekeeping together, but legally—as far as their family and community were concerned—they were married." (Erin Wathen, *Calling All Angels*)

"So Mary turning up pregnant is, let's just say, awkward. Joseph knows that their marriage is not official yet in at least one critical way, and so he cannot be the father. In Joseph's world, he has only two options available to him: one is to divorce her; the other is to submit her for public stoning, as indicated in Deuteronomic law. In this case, divorce is clearly the good-guy move. And Mathew's author even goes so far as to specify that Joseph will 'divorce her quietly,' revealing perhaps the depths of

his compassion—even before his life-changing encounter with this angel.

“In telling Joseph to stay married and raise this child as his own, the angel is essentially calling Joseph to abandon all his values, to take on a wife who is carrying a child who does not, in the strictest sense, belong to him.”

The angel must have made a compelling case to Joseph. Or, maybe it wasn’t all up to the angel. “Maybe Joseph himself possessed some kind of inner strength that allowed him to see past the anxiety of the present moment and muster the courage to move forward in faith.”

Joseph moves through his fears to stand in solidarity with Mary, shielding her from harm and committing himself to walking with her in this tenuous and unknown journey.

In essence, it’s Joseph saying to Mary what God says in Isaiah in chapter 41: “Take courage... do not fear, for I am with you.”

In these texts, we’re asked not to fix the world in our day-to-day journeys, but to take each other’s hands and walk forward into the world—together, much like Joseph and Mary walked forward together in the face of fear.

The week gone by has reminded us of the world’s dangers: the attack on a group of Jews celebrating Hannukah in Australia—where several died and others were wounded by gunfire, the shootings at Brown University—where two students died and others were injured, and the awful murders of movie director and actor Rob Reiner and his wife in their California home.

These incidents give us reasons to be fearful—fearful of those who would do us harm (even our own family members

perhaps), fear that our kids simply going to class one day might never come home, and the fear that our differences—in ethnicity or religion—might cause someone out of hate to lash out in violence.

Joseph, though, teaches us that the best response to fear is to take the hand of the fearful and walk with them—to love in the face of fear, not in isolation but with others.

Love is really the only effective antidote to fear. And love is not only a grand, romantic feeling, or something we would be lucky to fall into. It is often intentional and a decision.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture from 1964: “When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response which is little more than emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.”

Love is action; it’s taking the hand of the fearful and being in community with them.

You know, there are no words in scripture directly attributed to Joseph. In this story, where he is the central character, he doesn’t say a word in response to the angel. It’s only his actions that we notice in response.

And those actions spoke volumes. New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey writes of Joseph: “In his cameo appearance, Matthew presents Joseph as a human being of remarkable spiritual stature. He possesses the boldness, daring, courage and strength of character to stand up against his entire community and take Mary as his wife. He did so in spite of forces that no doubt wanted her stoned. His vision of justice stayed his hand. In short, he was able to re-process his anger into grace.”

This is the very work Jesus would do at the end of his life. Jesus too re-processed his pain and anger into the supreme act of grace, dying for those who had betrayed him. He too would remain silent as he was humiliated. As Isaiah 53:7 prophesies: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.”

In this respect, Joseph is a forerunner of the greater things his adopted son would do. He received his calling from God and he resolutely obeyed. And in obeying, he took the hand of Mary and stood by her.

I know so many of you who have taken the hand of somebody you love and who is in need and stood by them. In the face of illness or trouble or even death and despite your great inconvenience, you haven't left them. You've walked in lock step with them.

And so, whether it's people we know who are fearful, or people we don't know well who might be fearful of us, we have options. We have the option of either going it alone in fear or the option of extending our hand to someone who is fearful and walking with that person in love. And if we do, we might find their fears not completely erased, but at least likely to have been reduced.

We can't fix the world; we can't eliminate all the threats. But we can take each other's hands and walk forward into the world—together.

In the birth of Christ, which we celebrate this week, the Lord Jesus does this for us—taking our trembling hands, walking with us, and not letting go.