

Love in Believing
Isaiah 7:10-17; Matthew 1:18-25
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Unborn babies in the womb can hear. They can hear the voices of those around them, of music being played, and other sounds, like the heartbeat, blood circulating, and the swishing of digestion. This may be why so many of us love being near the ocean. It reminds us of the soothing sounds of the womb.

Neonatal researchers have found that around the seventh month of pregnancy, a fetus's heart rate slows down slightly whenever the mother is speaking, indicating that the mother's voice has a calming effect.

By the time they're born, babies can actually recognize their mother's voice. In one study, doctors gave day-old infants pacifiers that were connected to voice recordings. Depending on the babies' sucking patterns, the pacifiers either turned on the sound of their mother's voice or that of an unfamiliar woman's voice. The amazing result is that within 10 minutes, the babies learned to adjust their sucking rate on the pacifier to turn on their own mother's voice. This points not only to a newborn's ability to learn quickly, but especially the newborn's innate love for the mother's voice.

As children grow older, and separate from their parents, they claim to still "hear their voices, telling them what to do." This is the parent's voice internalized. For some, they choose to follow the command they hear in their heads, and for others, they choose to do the exact opposite.

I wonder if that's how it is we respond to God's voice. Like the newborn baby who recognizes the parent's voice, but, growing older, develops a mind of one's own and chooses to not always obey the parents' commands, so are we with God's voice. We become so full in our heads with other voices and sounds and thoughts that we disregard altogether God's voice, and perhaps don't even know how to recognize it.

Jesus says in John chapter 10, "I know my sheep, and they know me. My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me." Do we? How do we recognize the voice of God?

In the Old Testament passage, Ahaz clearly recognizes God's voice, and he chooses to disregard it. God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign. This reminds me of someone unable to keep a secret, like, maybe for a surprise party she being planned or a gift being given. What do you want to do Saturday night? Do you have any plans? Make sure you are home by 7, ok?! Or, I have a package for you, see? Don't you want to know what's in it?! And the person is completely disinterested, or even yet, claims they don't want to know what's in it because they are supposed to wait until Christmas.

This is somewhat like God in the passage, telling Ahaz to ask for a sign. And Ahaz says, Oh no, I'm not supposed to put the Lord God to the test. True, this is Scriptural. But Ahaz misses the point. Ahaz isn't testing God if God is the one presenting the offer; rather, God is testing Ahaz. By Ahaz refusing the sign, he is actually refusing to trust in the living God who is speaking to him. God responds, My goodness! Ok, fine! If you're not going to take the bait, and ask for the sign, I'll just tell you straight up. There's a young woman with child, who is going to give birth to a son, and name him Immanuel, meaning God is with us.

In the second reading, Joseph also hears from God. In this scandalous New Testament passage, Joseph is faced with a difficult decision. He is engaged to Mary, which in ancient Israel was equivalent to being legally married, and before the wedding, she becomes pregnant. It would certainly appear that adultery snuck its way into this situation. In ancient Judaism, a woman guilty of adultery was to be punished to death by stoning, and the one she betrayed was able to throw the first stone.

Joseph, we read, is a righteous man. A man of justice. The passage reads that he was "unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, and so planned to dismiss her quietly," which meant a quick, private divorce. He didn't want to make a big public scene and spectacle. He chose to let Mary off the hook. He showed her grace. Just dismiss her quietly and move on.

We are not told of Joseph's discernment process. When faced with a difficult decision, there are questions we may ask to help us find resolution. Some say, What would Jesus do? Well, Joseph couldn't have asked this, because Jesus hadn't quite been born yet. Some say, Trust your gut. Maybe Joseph's gut told him to not make a big public scene and spectacle. Just dismiss her quietly. Move on. Some say, what would you regret more? Maybe Jesus considered making a scene, a public spectacle, and he knew he would regret this. He knew he would always wish he had just dismissed her quietly. Some say, make a decision, and live with it for a few days, and see how it feels. Well, this is what Joseph did. He made a decision he felt he could live with.

It is in this place of resolve -- of doing what he thinks is the right thing, the best thing he could possibly do, to quietly release Mary -- that an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, and tells Joseph not to be afraid; to take Mary as his wife, because the child is conceived from the Holy Spirit. She is going to bear a son, and Joseph is to name him Jesus, because he will save people from their sins. Like Immanuel – God is with us.

How many times have you awoken from a dream and been so glad that it was just a dream? I still have dreams that I'm on stage for opening night and I don't know any of my lines because I haven't even read the script yet. This could have been Joseph's response. He could have said, "Phew! Glad that was just a dream! Man! I have no intention of marrying that woman!"

But he doesn't respond like this. Somehow, the angel in the dream convinces Joseph to abandon his carefully devised plan. It doesn't say he deliberated: Hmmm. Quietly dismiss her, let it go, move on.... Or marry her. The passage says that when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife, and when she had borne a son, *he named him Jesus*, thereby adopting him and bringing him into the family line of David, fulfilling the ancient prophecy in Isaiah, a passage with which he would have been familiar.

That's some serious trust. That's some serious faith. Joseph was willing to give up his social position to be used by God. This man Joseph astounds me with his courage and his faith.

I'm perplexed as to why Joseph doesn't get more airtime in the Bible, or in our Scriptures or pulpits. A member of the congregation recently introduced me to a wonderful book of poetry by Ann Weems called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, and one of the poems is about this very thing. It is called, "Getting to the Front of the Stable."

*Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?
Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
and told him to stand in the back of the crèche,
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?
God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful
In spite of the gossip in Nazareth,
In spite of the danger from Herod.
This man, Joseph, listened to angels
And it was he who named the Child
Emmanuel.
Is this a man to be stuck for centuries
In the back of the stable?
Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway
Guarding the mother and child
Or greeting shepherds and kings.
When he wasn't in the doorway,
He was probably urging Mary to get some rest,
Gently covering her with his cloak,
Assuring her that he would watch the Child.
Actually, he probably picked the Child up in his arms
And walked him in the night,
Patting him lovingly
Until he closed his eyes.*

*This Christmas, let us give thanks to God
For this man of incredible faith
Into whose care God placed the Christ Child.
As a gesture of gratitude,
Let's put Joseph in the front of the stable*

*Where he can guard and greet
And cast an occasional glance
At this Child
Who brought us life.*

When we consider Joseph and his abiding faith, we *could* ask ourselves, the familiar WWJD, meaning What Would *Joseph* do? This man, who makes up his mind to do the right thing against societal and cultural values, who stands up for peace and forgiveness rather than violence and annihilation; this man who then changes his mind because of a dream where he hears the voice of an angel. And he recognizes that voice as the voice of God. Telling him not to stone her, not to dismiss her quietly, but to go a giant step of forgiveness further, *to marry her*. To marry pregnant Mary.

When we ask What Would Jesus Do, what are we asking? We are asking for guidance in the way of peace and justice. We are asking for the most loving response. Jesus makes the loving choice. And isn't it interesting, but not perhaps surprising, that this is what his earthly father does. Joseph made the loving choice. God chose for Jesus' earthly father a man who was a law abider but was willing to forgo the law to do the right thing. Just the type of man God would need as a surrogate father to his son.

There is a passage in the Gospel of John about an adulterous woman brought to the temple by the religious authorities. They ask Jesus what he thinks about the Law of Moses regulating stoning as a punishment for this sin. Jesus pauses to write something in the sand. The scripture doesn't say what Jesus is writing, but could it be that he is reflecting on his own mother, that his own mother could have been in this very situation, in a crowd ready to throw stones at an adulterous woman? And Jesus responds, "He who has never sinned can throw the first stone." If it were not for Joseph, Jesus may have not died on the cross but in the womb.

Joseph is a God-fearing man, meaning he believed in God, he trusted God. Believing in God, he is inherently motivated by love – because, as it says in 1 John, God is love. It is indeed Mary's love that allowed her to say "Yes" to the angel that tells her she is going to bear a child. And it is indeed Joseph's love that allows him to say "Yes" to the angel that tells him not to be afraid, to go ahead and marry the young woman who is pregnant.

The loving choice is not promised to be the easy choice. This is why it may be difficult to discern. Joseph had a strong, trusting, and faithful relationship with God, and perhaps this is how Joseph knew that the dream was of God. He heard the voice, he knew the voice, he trusted the voice, he followed the voice.

What challenge are we being called to discern today? Can we make a commitment to listen for God, and can we take courage in trusting and following the response we receive?

The good news today is that God is alive and well, working among and through us. We need only, like the baby in the womb, and like Joseph in his dream, to recognize the voice, the voice that ultimately calms our troubled hearts.