



Sermon: December 19, 2021

Scripture Reading: Matthew 1: 18-25

The Message: Who's Afraid of Christmas?

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**The Rev. Dr.
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I may have a twinge of nostalgia for the holiday concerts that will not be taking place in public schools this year, but if truth be told, I think I'm just as glad not to see how afraid school boards are of Christmas.

The last one I attended saw throngs of parents, siblings and grandparents braving rush hour to crowd into a too small auditorium to watch their children perform.

Rehearsals had taken weeks.. Each class sang. The school choir sang, "Season of Hope". Mrs. Evan's grade 2 and 3 class sang. "Hanukkah Song". No dreidel song, no Christmas carols.

The scripted introductions created an argument about what kind of concert it was: Hanukkah, pagan solstice festival, Quanza. Santa Claus was mentioned, but no reference to the birth of a baby, let alone the name Jesus.

After the concert, Hannah, a great fan of Hannukah celebrations at our local synagogue, said, "Nana, no one in my class knows what Hanukkah is except me and my friend Noah."

So what had these children learned from this watering down of several traditions and avoidance of the Christ child? A few very forgettable tunes, and not much more.

What is this fear of the Christ child? What could reference to a tiny infant - who is, after all, the only reason that Holiday concerts exist at all -- do to inflame criticism, rock the boat, disturb the status quo?

Jesus did a good job of instilling fear into the powers that be of his time. Herod feared him so much he slaughtered infants trying to get rid of him.

Joseph was afraid -- he planned to put Mary quietly aside when he found she was pregnant. But he opened himself to an angel's voice in a dream.

"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.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Joseph listened to the angel's voice, named God's son Jesus, and fulfilled the prophet!

Mary must have been afraid too. But she too opened herself in obedience to the power of God.

As we celebrate Christmas in a society that still fears the baby, we are reminded of his power: God's power revealed in the form of a baby that is rejected by the world, even as he comes bearing a message of hope, a message of peace, a message of joy, and a message of the power of God's love to overturn hate and fear and even death. It wasn't a popular message to many then either.

At my husband's high school reunion graduates still remember the Christmas pageant when Martha Mandelsohn was Mary.

"Why not?" asked the teacher. "Mary was Jewish after all." And in that one remark, children learned that Jesus was born to a Jewish mother.

Whatever your faith experience, the message of a refugee family in an occupied and oppressed land, having a son whose birth is still remembered 2 000 years later, is something to celebrate.

What do we say to those who fear the Christ child? To the school board, I wanted to say, If you are not going to mention Jesus, then could you leave our holy time alone? Your holiday concert could happen in mid February when we all need cheering up. Let us sing our carols and light our candles, take communion and worship the birth of the Christ child. Let us honour Mary and Joseph because they accepted God's summons in humility and obedience. Let us honour those shepherds who listened to angel voices. Let us celebrate that God offers us grace in the most unexpected ways.

Let us receive the gift, and walk in the path of Jesus with open hands and hearts, and allow us to notice that God will come to us and to our world, to save a lost humanity and bring life out of death.