

Sermon: A Fine Mess
Text: Matthew 1:18-25
Date: December 18, 2016
Context: WWPC
Fourth Sunday of Advent
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*. . . An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife . . .'*

Matthew 1:20

Some of you may remember the Laurel and Hardy film, *Another Fine Mess*. It was a short movie, just over twenty-eight minutes. But it told a lot of story in that time, though I'm not sure "story" is exactly the right word to describe the events that unfold in that brief span.

Things start off normally enough. Well, normally enough for a Laurel and Hardy film. When the action opens, the two protagonists are being chased through a park by a police officer, for reasons that aren't immediately clear.

They take refuge from the chase in the cellar of a mansion owned by one Colonel Wilburforce Buckshot, who has just left the country for an extended safari in South Africa.

If you know anything at all about how a Laurel and Hardy movie works, you won't be surprised to know that chaos ensues.

The film essentially consists of a series of pratfalls, followed by several cases of mistaken identity, a cascade of people tumbling down staircases, and a police officer shot in the backside with an errant arrow, launched from inside the mansion.

In the end, with the police still hunting for them and now closing in, Stan and Ollie escape the mess they've created by dressing up as a wildebeest and fleeing on a stolen tandem bicycle, as you would expect from a rogue wildebeest. They then ride into a railroad tunnel and encounter a train, only to emerge on the other side riding unicycles.

You know, the stuff of everyday life.

You laugh.

One person who might not find the proceedings quite so amusing is Joseph, for one simple reason: because perhaps more than anyone in scripture, Joseph knows what it's like to find himself squarely in the middle of a first-rate mess.

It's Mary who gets all the credit for Christmas, of course. Hers is the story we know, the story we prefer, the story we love.

If you don't believe me, Google "The Annunciation." Then click on the "images" button at the top of the page. We did this in the adult Sunday school class today. The results were telling.

You will see scores of images depicting that beatific moment when Mary receives the news from Gabriel that she has been chosen to be the vessel of God's own coming into the world.

Joseph? Not so much. If you search hard, you can find paintings that feature him. But he's portrayed as a kind of deadbeat dad, asleep off to the side, or barefoot and cutting one of his socks into ribbons. Swaddling clothes? Dementia? Who can say?

It's an injustice, in a way. Because not only is Joseph's role just as central to this history-changing story as Mary's is, it also features, yes, an annunciation of sorts.

But we're getting a little ahead of things. Joseph's story actually starts with a scene we are not privy to, which must have been centered around one of the most awkward conversations ever.

"Um, Joseph, dear?"

"Yes."

"I've got something I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Well, there's really no other way to say this, so I'll just come right out with it: I'm with child."

"But you can't be."

"And yet I am."

"Who's the father?"

"Well, that's sort of hard to explain."

"Try me."

It's safe to assume Joseph does not buy Mary's explanation -- and, really, can you blame him? For when we pick up his story in Matthew, Joseph plans to quietly dismiss his fiancé.

Commentators talk about how gracious this gesture was. And that is true. Joseph could have shamed Mary, and shunned her, and ruined her life completely.

But his plan also represents a crisis of, let's say, biblical proportions. Christmas, heaven's loved-based insurgency, this audacious plan to penetrate the world's darkness with the coming of God's own light, all of this depends on Joseph.

In the Jewish tradition, the perspective from which Matthew writes, the Messiah is understood to be a son of David, and it is Joseph who stands in this lineage. It is he who gives this unborn boy his messianic status, and it is he who will name the child Jesus, Yeshua, for he will save us from our sins.

And now this plan is at risk. Even if Joseph does the gracious thing and quietly dismisses Mary, all of this will be lost. The plan will for naught. And there's a chance we would not be here in this sanctuary today, celebrating this season.

Of course this will not do. As the text reminds us, just when Joseph had resolved to do this, an angel of the lord visits him in a dream and speaks the same words to this young husband-to-be that Gabriel speaks to Mary: Fear not.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

Yes, your life, your world, everything you planned for, everything you hoped for, everything you dreamed about and imagined for yourself and your family--all of this is about to change. But fear not. God is with you and for you!

Joseph wakes and does as the angel commands him. Which is why this story merits far more attention than we typically give it.

The miracle chose Mary. She was going to bear God's child. Which is sort of like winning the Powerball Lottery, if instead of landing a \$400M cash payout that meant, of all the women in the world, you get to bear and raise God's incarnate son. Who is going to say no to that?

But it was the mess that chose Joseph. The mess of a life completely disrupted, for remember, this was not his son. The mess of plans and hopes and dreams shattered.

And that matters because that's much more like life as we know it.

Yes, we all create tangles of our own making from time to time. A bad decision at work, an untimely investment decision, an ill-advised romantic decision. We've all found ourselves in messes of our own making at some point.

But as often as not, the mess chooses us. It's like a Laurel and Hardy film, only less funny, and we don't make the mess, it comes at us full bore.

Family scandals, unpleasant surprises, devastating disappointments, unforeseen and unwelcome medical news. These find us.

Your sister's youngest son is busted for selling meth. His mug shot is splashed on the front page of the local paper, your family name suddenly dragged through the mud.

Your daughter joyfully announces that she is great with child, which, unlike Joseph, prompts her not so great fiancé to skedaddle, taking with him the job that paid for the rent and the food.

Some drunk wahoo runs a stoplight and smashes into you, totaling your car and sending you to the ER.

There are just days in everyone's life when you wake from your dream of the way you want your life to be, the way you want your family to be, your country to be. The way you want our world to be, and you realize the dream is just that: a dream.

On those days you sit up in bed and rub the sleep from your eyes. You slide into your slippers and head to the bathroom to brush your teeth.

You look in the mirror and the first thing you realize is that you're not the person you expected to be at this point in your life.

A quick shake of the head--how did this happen, you wonder.

Then you pad into the kitchen, pour a cup of coffee, call up your favorite newspaper on our favorite mobile device, and promptly read headlines that strike terror in your heart, or simply break it. News out of Washington, out of Moscow, out of China, out of Raleigh, out of Aleppo.

It all feels like a giant mess, one we can't stop or control. And that's true. The only thing we can control is how we respond to it.

Which is why Joseph's story matters so much. This good and decent man wakes up from a dream in which he's told, by an angel, that nothing will be the same anymore, or the way he wanted it to be, the way he expected it to be.

As I see it, you've got three choices in that moment: You can throw a tantrum and give in to resentment; you can run from the mess; or you can participate in it.

Joseph chooses the latter. He accepts the mess, leans into it. And that changes everything.

Which is ultimately what Regina Brett did. Ms. Brett happens to be one of my favorite inspiration writers. And because of that, we've heard a little bit of her story before. But on this Sunday especially, it bears repeating.

Her whole life was a hot mess essentially from her first breath.

She was the runt in a litter of 11 children, and so growing up she did not get the love she needed or deserved from her parents.

She was tormented by the nuns in her parochial school, and so she gave up on God by the time she was six. Lost and confused, she spent the next 10 years getting more lost and more confused.

She drank too much at 16, was an unwed mother at 21, then a single mother for the next 18 years until she finally found the man of her dreams at 40. Then she got cancer at 41. It took her a year to fight it and another year to recover from it.

There's enough mess in a story like that to last several lifetimes. The timing of her cancer diagnosis alone might have consumed her with anger and resentment toward God and toward everyone and everything else for that matter.

But it was the part about being an unwed mother at 21 and a single mom for the next 18 years that caught my attention this week, as I reflected on this story of another unplanned pregnancy.

In her wonderful book *God Never Blinks*, she tells this story. Unlike today's story, there was no mystery in this one. Regina knew exactly who the father was.

Unfortunately, unlike Joseph, this man wanted nothing to do with her. Even worse, when Regina gave birth to a beautiful little girl, Gabriella, he wanted nothing to do with his baby daughter, either.

But then he himself finally got married, and things took an unexpected turn. He decided he was ready to be a dad, so he contacted Regina and asked if he could be involved in Gabriella's life. Regina swallowed her resentment and said a reluctant yes.

Of course he immediately fell in love with his little girl, and started to shower her with the all things loving fathers shower their daughters with—time, love, affection, attention. Probably some teddy bears thrown in there for good measure and more than a few kisses on her forehead.

But then he and his new wife adopted two daughters of their own. The contact with Gabby slowly faded, until it stopped altogether.

Regina's expectations for how this situation was going play out, her hopes for her little girl, these were suddenly shattered. And she now found herself in a bigger mess than she was in before.

What would she say to her daughter? What reason could she give that would explain to Gabriella why her daddy rejected her?

Not surprisingly, she seethed with anger. Her resentment reached such toxic levels it started to feel like chemotherapy. Only it wasn't doing her or Gabriella any good. It was merely poisoning both of them.

Finally, she'd had enough. She realized this was the mess she was given, so she would make the best of it. She couldn't change the details of what had happened, but she could change the details of how she responded to it, and what came next.

So she started to tell herself and her daughter a story in which Gabriella's dad wasn't the villain, and in which she and her daughter were no longer victims.

She admitted that Gabby's dad did the best he could. It wasn't all she wanted from him, for certain, not even close to what her little deserved, but this man gave his daughter as much as he had to give.

In the end, Regina opted not to keep nurturing her resentment and not to flee the mess, but instead to lean into it. And from that day on, her life steadily got better.

Does any of this feel familiar?

Does the state of our world feel like one big mess at the moment? It does to me and I suspect it does to you, too.

But hear this, because this is also true: heaven's love based insurgency? This same plan to penetrate the world's darkness with the light of God's own coming, well it's not over. It's on, friends.

And we don't have the time or the luxury to let anger or resentment or despair distract or consume us.

So tomorrow when you wake up from your dreams and you shuffle into the bathroom to brush your teeth, I want you to look into the mirror and remember that you're made of the same stuff as Joseph, = the same stuff, as Mary, too, for that matter.

If life in the here and now feels like a giant mess--like one big Laurel and Hardy film, only not as funny-- remember that what was true for Joseph is still true for us:

We can flee the mess or we can participate in it.

The real scandal of Christmas is this: God needed human partners then for the Love to come and for Light to break into the world, and God needs human partners now.

This insurgency is on, friends. The only question: is what choice are you going to make?