

"Precarity"

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

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Sometimes you hear a delightful word and you just can't wait to use it in conversation: hootenanny or folderol, resplendent or festoon. Of course, sometimes the delightful word means something that is quite un-delightful. A few weeks ago, the very perspicacious Joshua Narcisse spoke to us about Advent in our Great Hall class, and he used a beautiful word: *precarity*, which has a rather unlovely meaning: the state of being uncertain or (as you might infer) precarious. After that definition there is an increasingly curious list of synonyms: unpredictable, risky, then shaky, iffy, dodgy, and hairy. Precarity. Such a great word, even if it names a feeling we'd rather avoid.

We cannot avoid it today. The feeling of precarity runs through every line of Matthew's story. Mary and Joseph's marriage is agreed to but not finalized; things are unsettled. Mary is pregnant, a "delicate," as we say, condition in the best of circumstances, and her circumstances are quite fragile. And Joseph and Mary don't need any of these dubious and even hazardous events to remind them that they already, always live on the brink, living as an underclass in an occupied land.

Then listen to all the words describing Joseph's attempts to impose order on a disordered story. Joseph planned, was unwilling, wanted to protect, resolved, but those words mask all the ways that their carefully constructed lives seem to be collapsing like a house built on sand. When in a restless sleep, Joseph has a dream with a new plan. I have more than one response to this moment in the plot. Part of me thinks: was there ever more an uncertain source of information and planning that a strange and unmanageable dreamscape? You know the world is chancy and dicey when a dream is your strategic planning process. Still, there is another part of me that knows that even without remembering the particulars of a dream, I've woken up with a new perspective on a frustrating problem, and that there have also been times when I've been able to recall some fleeting, beautiful, and reassuring glimpse of a dream that stayed with me as a talisman.

"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, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' ... When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." Joseph wakes, and though his circumstances remain exactly as they were when he laid his head on his bed the night before, he has a new intention. In every discernible way, things are just the same, precarity is still the word of the day, yet he is not afraid of the same things anymore. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Yoking himself to Mary is not the thing that will tip the whole world over, rather binding himself more completely and intentionally to Mary will help to bring a rescuing savior into the unsteady and precarious world.

At the end of her poem, "Night Swim at Shadow Lake," Anni Liu admits, "My entire life, I have been afraid of the wrong things." With so much that is unclear, uncertain, and unsure, it can be hard to figure out what we ought to properly fear. We can be afraid of all the wrong things. It can be hard to know what exactly the cause our precarity might be. We might think that it's getting closer to a scandal; we might imagine that things will be worse if we choose the unpopular and untested path. We might be afraid, our entire lives, of moving closer, of embracing risk and love and hope because all around us people say "be careful, protect yourself, don't get your hopes up."

The angel of the Lord does not tell Joseph that he is wrong to be worried or afraid. There is a lot about his life, Mary's life, their people's lives that is marked by real precarity. But drawing closer to his betrothed as she carries a questionable child into the world is the wrong thing to be afraid of, according to the angel. The next right thing for him to do is not to distance himself from love, but it is to wrap his arms around this scandalous and wondrous hope.

Isolating ourselves and distancing ourselves from complex and difficult situations is so tempting, to get away from the perceived danger and taint of disgrace seems like a prudent choice. But alone-ness is not the answer today. Joseph needs to be with Mary; she needs to be with him. We need to be with each other when the world seems rickety and erratic. This is the message from the dream, from the angel of the Lord: that in a treacherous world, we do better to stay together, reaching out and taking someone's hand for the journey ahead.

Beautifully, this dream-plan reveals even more, and when Joseph stays with Mary, the result of that is not just their own security and rescue, but the world's. "He will save his people from their sins ... You shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" When we choose to draw closer, to be with each other, this is just one of the ways that God-with-us is born into the world all over again. Joseph chooses Mary, and in that choice a new way of God being with us begins to grow - for him and amazingly for all of us.

In a thousand ways, Joseph's life is different from yours and mine. Yet, you and I also live with fear and trepidation about our own list of things. I don't really even need to make this list for you, having lived through collective perilous times of pandemic crises, violence and cruelty, political and civic instability; not to mention our smaller, private lives in which the supports we count on can seem suddenly untrustworthy. We know the feeling of precarity, how fragile and tenuous it can all seem. And just like Joseph, difficult decisions keep us up at night. You and I have to sort out if we are afraid of the right things or the wrong things. All this is the same as it ever was.

And it's also true that each of us, whether we pay attention or give them credence, catches glimpses of beauty and hope while waking or sleeping. In so many marvelous ways, we receive nudges that might move us closer to be with each other. All of us can choose, or not, to believe that God is with us. We can wake from sleep and do as the angel of the Lord commanded: do not be afraid, take hold of one another, and bring Emmanuel in to this precarious world all over again.