

Betsey Moe
Sermon 12.13.09
“The Hopes and Fears of All the Years”

Isaiah 12:2-6

2Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. 3With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

4And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. 5Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. 6Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Matthew 1:18-25

18Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But just when he had resolved to do this, 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. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Last week, I heard a guy refer to the town he grew up in as a “bedroom community,” a suburb that only exists so that people who worked in the nearby city would have a place to sleep. Bethlehem might have been referred to as a “bedroom community.” Just 5 miles south of Jerusalem, it was a typical small community where not a lot of important business went on. If you wanted to do any significant trading or worshipping, you’d head up the road to Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, we hear of a few incidents happening in Bethlehem, a few minor characters coming from that place, but for the most part, it is a little town that does not merit much attention until after Jesus’ birth. When the prophet Micah said, “You, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel” (5:2), you can hear the irony. It is as if Micah were saying, “You’d never believe this, but out of *Bethlehem*, of all places, will come someone great.”

Which explains the words of our beloved Christmas carol, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie./Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.” It’s a picture not just of a bedroom community, but of a small town *literally* asleep, unaware. The crux of the song is that in this sleepy little town, where no one expected anything significant to happen, the gospel took shape: “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light./The hopes and fears of all the

years are met in *thee* tonight!” This little, sleepy town, this bedroom community, was caught off guard; God appeared when the residents were completely unaware of it.

The same element of surprise is present in the Joseph story we heard today. Joseph, we understand, is an honorable person who seemed to be a logical, yet compassionate, thinker. As was the custom at the time, his parents had arranged a marriage with a girl, Mary, from another family. Joseph and Mary may hardly have known each other when this story took place. But Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant; and instead of making a big public deal out of it, Joseph made up his mind to get out of the marriage contract as discreetly as possible so as to not make life any worse for Mary. Joseph had the plan in his head, and he was ready to carry it out. In this rotten circumstance that Joseph didn't choose, it was the only thing that made sense; surely God would have approved.

Until, in a dream, God caught Joseph off guard; through an angel, God told him to take Mary as his wife and to trust that the child was from God. In the course of one night, Joseph's course was changed; his deepest hopes and fears for his own life were met in a way he never expected.

The surprise element, it turns out, would continue to play out in the child's life: after he grew, Jesus would heal those whom no one else would touch, he would eat with people considered unholy, he would pay attention to children, who had no value to the society, proclaiming God's wholeness and welcome and hope when and where people least expected. And then, in the most unexpected turn of events, he would die a criminal's death. Everyone who knew him thought this incredible man's life was over – and for a couple of days, there was nothing but silence. Yet, three days later, in the dark streets shone the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years were met, this time, in the resurrected Christ.

Today (at the 9:00 service) we celebrated Confirmation, a rite of passage for those baptized in the church. For parents and students, Confirmation is a loaded experience; there are many hopes and fears wrapped up in this short process. Was this meaningful enough to make a difference? Will faith grow or stagnate from here? Am I doing what my parents want me to do? Am I being true to myself and my own convictions? If these hopes and fears are not satisfied within the eight weeks or the two years, or however long the program is, a person can think that God isn't real after all or that God passed him or her by for some reason. But we know because of Jesus Christ that God doesn't work on a predictable schedule; God appears when we least expect God to appear. Confirmation may be an opportunity for God to appear and for the Spirit to be at work, but it is not a guarantee of spiritual transformation. That will occur in God's time.

At our last confirmation class at the end of November, Pastor Ken, Pastor Brad and I shared our faith stories with the students. In each of our stories, God appeared when we could not have predicted it.

Ken was a kid who was very religious (I know that may come as a surprise). He remembers reading compulsively, voraciously, through the Bible at about age twelve because he had a real fear of God and a desire to please God. Out of this desire, he picked up a biography of Martin Luther in the youth section at the local library. I doubt the author of this biography had conversion of the masses as his or her goal when writing it – but lo and behold, conversion is

exactly what happened in Ken as he read Luther's story. Ken saw himself in the young Luther who had wanted desperately to please God, to prove himself as worthy; and as he read about Luther's epiphany that God accepted him out of pure grace, Ken understood those words as God's word to him. Later, Ken would go through the confirmation process and make a public commitment to God, but really, God had appeared to Ken before that through a library book.

For me, I went through confirmation bored most of the time, and on the day of my confirmation, I went through the motions because I felt it was something I needed to do – most of all, it had been a five- or six-year process in my Lutheran Church, and I wasn't going to let all that work go to waste. But two months after my confirmation day, I attended a Young Life camp because there were cute boys going, not because I wanted to learn more about God. At the camp, I heard the gospel as if for the first time. God appeared to this boy-crazy teenager – God caught me off guard – and has continued to come, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small ways, ever since.

Pastor Brad went through confirmation classes as a seventh grader in San Diego. Brad was a thinker. At the end of the classes, Brad decided not to publicly profess his faith with the rest of the class; he believed in God, but he knew he didn't believe in Jesus Christ as savior. The resurrection was particularly inconceivable. Brad could not in good conscience commit to something he did not understand. Brad did end up joining the church a couple of years later after attending Youth Group and experiencing God as "close." But it was not until college when Brad shared meals with other students in the home of a pastor that a deeper acceptance occurred. Surprisingly, it wasn't through theological arguments and explanations around this table that Brad experienced a transformation of the mind; it was through observing this family care for each other, love each other, that Brad saw the life of Christ reflected and made real. All his yet unanswered questions about theology were overshadowed by the living God Brad saw in this family. God caught Brad off guard; God appeared when Brad did not expect God to appear, and the rest is history.

The good news today is that God still comes to us as God came to sleepy Bethlehem, as God came to a highly rational and pre-planned Joseph, as God came to each of your pastors, when we least expected it. Sometimes God completely redirects our lives; sometimes God simply shows us something new. The hope we share is that God is faithful; God *will* come and complete the work God began in each of us.

How silently, oh how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where *meek* souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.