

Advent 4A, Matthew 1:18-26
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How many of you recall the Dr. Seuss story “Horton Hears a Who!”

Horton is an elephant living in the Jungle of Nool and one day, while sitting in the “cool of the pool”, Horton hears a voice coming from a small speck of dust that is blowing by. Believing that there is a person on that speck of dust in need of help, he gently carries the speck of dust to the safety of a clover. Determined to protect the Whos living in Who-ville upon the dust speck, Horton plucks up the clover and walks through the jungle with it. All the other animals- the kangaroos, the monkeys, the birds- all think he is crazy for not only believing that people live on a speck of dust but for talking to them as well. The monkeys decide to stop all this nonsense of “Whos who are not,” and snatch the clover, giving it to an eagle to kindly get rid of it.

The other animals of the Jungle of Nool just couldn’t wrap their heads around something that seemed impossible. People living on a speck of dust? Inconceivable! Totally absurd! That Horton expected them to believe his fantastical story was preposterous!

Whenever I think of this story, my mind turns to Mary and Joseph before the long journey to Bethlehem. They were engaged to each other. In Mary and Joseph’s world this was a legal binding contract. They were essentially married even though they didn’t live together or have more than distance contact in the presence of others.

And then Mary comes to Joseph. “Joseph,” she says, “I’m pregnant. An angel told me that I would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit and that my son shall be called the Son of God amongst other titles.”

Joseph eyes grow wide. “You’re kidding, right?” Mary, eyes downcast, shakes her head. Joseph becomes angry. “How could you? And you expect me to believe that an angel... that the Holy Spirit...that God is responsible? Unbelievable! That is impossible! How gullible do you think I am?” Joseph storms off leaving a shattered Mary in his wake.

Joseph didn’t believe Mary’s story any more than the jungle animals believed Horton’s. Then, as my son once put it, Joseph receives his own holy house-call. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and says, “Do not be afraid.” Words guaranteed to cause instant panic and an increased heart rate. The angel confirms Mary’s story. Joseph receives his own annunciation.

Joseph then does the unthinkable in his society. He goes through with the marriage despite friends and family undoubtedly telling him that he is crazy. They probably told him that he should at least quietly send her away. He could have. He had every right, every logical reason to do so. The angel wasn’t twisting his arm all the way to the altar. Joseph had a choice. He could refuse to believe Mary’s story along with his own annunciation and break off the engagement, leaving him free to walk an easy path, or he could choose the harder road that put

him at odds with the culture in which he lived. He chose to believe Mary's story that the child she was carrying was the Son of God. He chose to believe his own annunciation and he named the child Jesus, Emmanuel, God is With Us.

Joseph raised God's child as his own. He protected him, nurtured him, taught him how to drive a nail and use a plane to shape wood. He fed him, clothed him, made sure he had clean water to drink, bandaged his blisters, and loved him. He did this all because he chose to believe Mary's story.

We hear Mary's side of things a lot. Joseph's, not so much. We hear Joseph's story once every three years. In fact we don't know much about Joseph at all. He is only mentioned in the bible again in the flight to Egypt and the return to Galilee, with a brief mention in passing during Jesus' disappearance to preach in the temple when he was twelve. Joseph is an unsung hero in the story of Jesus.

Over the many years that I have been in charge of the Christmas and Epiphany pageants, when I ask kids what part they want to play in the story, hands will shoot up as they shout out, "Wiseman!", "Mary!", "An angel!" When I ask, "Who wants to be Joseph?" Crickets. Total silence. Except for the year that one little boy excitedly said, "I want to be Joseph so I can wear the coat with all the colors!" When I pointed out that was the wrong Joseph, he immediately changed his mind and wanted to be a sheep instead. Joseph just doesn't "pop out" in the story. He blends into the background and is indistinguishable from the rest of the world except for the choices that he makes.

But that is exactly what makes him so important. He is just like us- an average Joe, slogging his way through life that is filled with struggle, heartache and heartbreak, anxiety and fear, and tough decisions. In our sterilized Hallmark card versions of the birth of Jesus we tend to distance ourselves from the reality of what it was like and what it is like. But, we really aren't that far from Bethlehem at all because, like Joseph, we have to decide if we believe Mary's story. Do we believe that the child she carries and whose birth we will celebrate in seven days is the child of God?

We read today the story of Joseph's annunciation, but it is also the annunciation of all of us. Do we believe Mary's story? Or do we give in to logic that says it is impossible? Do we give into our culture and a society that jeers at us for being gullible? Do we think the whole idea is just as crazy as the idea that a bunch of Whos in the town of Whoville live on a speck dust?

The annunciation of all of us- do we believe Mary's story? For if we do, then like Joseph we are called to protect, nurture, feed and clothe God's child. We are called to provide clean drinking water, shelter, safety, and medical care for God's child. We are called to educate, comfort, be present for, and love God's child.

Look to your left, to your right, in front of you and behind you, and you will see God's child. We are all children of God. Christ dwells in us. When you look into the face of your neighbor, you are seeing Jesus. We are the modern day Joseph protecting, nurturing, raising, and loving God's children. And the choices we make to love our neighbor as ourselves can cause others to

call us crazy or to ridicule us for choosing to tend to the needs of those who are different than us. We can choose the easy path and send God away so that we can continue to dwell in the comfort of our own desires, or we can choose the harder path, where we put what is important to God ahead of what is important to us.

Just to be clear, that doesn't mean running yourself into the ground taking care of the world. To take care of the world means you have to first take care of yourself. You are important to God. After all, you are God's child too. It does mean that to hear what is important to God, we must listen. We must be still so that we can hear the voice of God speaking to us whether it is being shouted from a speck of dust or coming through the people who surround us every day. God comes to us when we least expect it- in the cool of a pool, in a dream, in those moments when we let our guard down, and we let God in.

In these final days of Advent, relax, slow down, and listen for your own annunciation that God is with you and with the world.

Amen