

Officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were given a list of seven words or phrases to avoid in the budget process during a meeting Thursday with senior CDC officials. The words to avoid: “vulnerable,” “entitlement,” “diversity,” “transgender,” “fetus,” “evidence-based” and “science-based.” So, in addition to the word of the day from our young messengers. I invite you to listen for these words as well.

Christmas is almost here. Can you feel it? Can you feel the excitement in the air? Forget about your to-do lists and shopping lists for a minute and just be in this moment. We gather in community and we wait for the glorious birth of the baby Jesus, for Emmanuel which means ‘God with us’. We know that after Jesus is born he will change the world. We know he will preach love and compassion. We know he will challenge the status quo and he will teach that God has a special place in her heart for the most vulnerable people in society. We know what the birth of Jesus means, but when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, all he knows is that he is faced with a pregnant bride-to-be, and he is not the father.

Luke’s gospel focuses on Mary and her experience of saying yes to God’s call. She is told by the angel Gabriel that she is to carry a baby conceived of the Holy Spirit and that he will grow up to be the messiah. Mary answers God’s call saying, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Joseph is barely mentioned in the entire birth story. But in Matthew, the focus is on Joseph. As we enter the text we learn that Mary and Joseph are engaged. In ancient Israel a betrothal was similar to what we might think of as being engaged, but with a big difference. Betrothal was a binding legal agreement that could only be ended with divorce. During this time of betrothal, the bride-to-be would continue to live with her parents until the marriage took place at which time she would move in with her new husband.

The text then says that Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. We don’t know if this means that Joseph and Mary know that the child is from the Holy Spirit or if the narrator is simply informing the hearers of the divine nature of the pregnancy. In the next verse we learn that Joseph has had to make a decision about what to do

with this situation. He believes he has two options. This first option is to charge Mary with adultery and subject her to a humiliating trial. The resulting punishment that would have been severe and it was within the law for Mary to be stoned to death. As a man in first century Jewish culture, this action was one of his entitlements. Joseph believes that his only other option is to divorce Mary, which he could do as quietly as possible and would save her and her family from the humiliation and shame of a public trial. Matthew says that Joseph is a righteous man and as such, decides to “dismiss her quietly”.

Although Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel is not mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, I sometimes wonder if after the annunciation to Mary had taken place, if she shared the news with Joseph. When she told Joseph that she was pregnant, did she include the small detail that the Holy Spirit was involved? That scenario makes his decision to divorce her a little more interesting. If he knew that Mary’s child was from the Holy Spirit and not a result of adultery, then why the need for divorce? Did he not believe her? That’s certainly possible. Or was it something else?

What I love about this story is that when Joseph has made up his mind and thinks he has it all figured out, God breaks in and shakes things up. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and gives him some news that will change his life. His appearance to Joseph begins as almost all angelic appearances in the Bible do: the angel tells Joseph "Do not be afraid." But unlike the other appearances of angels, the object of Joseph's fear is not the angel. Maybe since the angel appears to Joseph in a dream instead of in his waking life, Joseph does not experience the same kind of fear that others do when the angel appears. Instead, the angels Joseph that he does not need to be afraid of taking Mary as his wife.

I find it interesting that fear is the emotion the angel associates with Joseph's decision to divorce Mary. I wonder exactly what Joseph was afraid of. Was he afraid of not following the law around adultery? Possibly. Although since Joseph decided not to subject Mary to a trial it seems that he was already pushing against the cultural norms and expectations. I wonder if he was afraid about how this pre-marital pregnancy would

be judged by other people. I wonder if Joseph wanted to believe Mary when she told him the fetus she was carrying was a gift from God, but he was too worried about his reputation and what other people would think to allow himself to experience the joyous nature of this news. It was certainly not a situation that could be proven with evidence-based or science-based tests in the first century.

The angel addresses Joseph as the son of David, thus establishing Joseph's connection to the divine King. He tells Joseph to name the boy Jesus and informs him that not only is the child conceived of the Holy Spirit, he will grow up to save the people from their sins. The name Jesus is derived from Yeshua a form of the name Joshua the original meaning of which was something like "God helps". But the name was connected to the Hebrew root for 'save' and can be interpreted as "God saves". By giving Jesus his name, Joseph would be in essence accepting Jesus into his family line - the Davidic line that reaches back to the father of Judaism, Abraham. This act of being the one to name Jesus would be Joseph's way of adopting Jesus as his son and thus saying "yes" to God's call.

When I was discerning whether or not I was being called to ministry as a vocation, I attended a weekend event at Pacific School of Religion as a prospective student. When I arrived on campus I met a few of the other attendees as we shared lunch in the dining hall. All three of the people at my table were folks who had recently graduated or were about to graduate from the undergraduate programs in either Religious Studies, or Biblical Studies. They were all pursuing the academic route in seminary – focusing on research and teaching instead of becoming clergy. After spending an hour over lunch with these academics, I was completely intimidated and close to being in a panic. What was I thinking? I was clearly not on the same level as these people. I did not grow up going to church every Sunday, I had not been much of a Bible reader and I had been out of school for 9 years. And when I was in college, I was studying Retail and Consumer Sciences, not religion. Clearly, I had made a mistake.

After lunch I called my husband Ken to share my fears and worries about whether I had misunderstood my calling. Sitting on the lawn of the seminary campus, I

was afraid I wouldn't measure up. I was worried that Ken and I would move our lives from Bothell, Washington to Berkeley, California and I would end up being an utter failure. Maybe the career aptitude test at the unemployment office was right and I was supposed to be a funeral director. As I shared my fears with Ken, he gently responded with words that I truly believe came through him from a divine source. He calmly said "There are things you will need for ministry that can be taught and there are things that can't be taught. I believe you have those things that can't be taught, and the others you will learn. That's what seminary is for." Through the phone, Ken was telling me "Do not be afraid."

Sometimes we worry or fear so much what other people will think of us, that we risk not hearing God's voice calling us on a certain path. Worry and fear about not fitting in or challenging the status quo, can get in our way of doing what is right instead of what is conventional. When we live in worry, our minds are focused on a future that is unknown instead of being focused on the present moment and it can rob us of experiences of joy right in front of us. If I had listened to my fears, I might not have noticed the diversity of backgrounds of the other potential students. I wasn't the only one who hadn't studied religion in school. I wasn't the only one who heard this calling in spite of my mostly un-churched life. I would have missed meeting some of the most amazing transgender clergy including the first transgender person to be ordained in the Lutheran church.

Can you remember a time when an angel in disguise helped you to live in joy instead of worry? When you needed to hear the message "Do not be afraid"? Or maybe you were the angel reminding someone that God is at work and listening to God's invitation is much more important than the opinion or perceptions of other people.

Living in fear and worry robs us of joy. When we are robbed of our joy, it is difficult to create more joy in the world. And more joy is something the world could use right now. May we all be messengers of joy in this world through our actions, or using whatever words necessary.