

December 18, 2022
Advent 4

Deacons, Angels, Messengers of God
Matthew 1:18-25

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
Sermon preached at the Celebration of New Ministry
Of The Venerable Tim Spannaus
The Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Detroit

May the God who creates...

Good Morning!

I want to tell you about the other story, the one that doesn't usually make it into anyone's Christmas Pageant. In this story, Mary is in the shadows. She is unwed, engaged, and now apparently pregnant. How her pregnancy is determined we do not know, perhaps it is evident. Joseph in response to this news is thoughtful, obedient to the law, righteous, and compassionate. And probably disappointed, peeved and more than likely angry, because he knows he has not slept with Mary. You can see why the details of this storyline are really somewhat problematic for most church school productions.

Joseph decides, rather than bring scandal upon Mary he will quietly dismiss her, avoid the trial that would name her promiscuity and would likely result in him being able to keep her dowry, and instead just move on.

And it is then, when he has come to this decision, letting her go without calling her out, staying out of the fray of the messy world, it is then that a messenger of God, an Angel of the Lord comes to him in a dream.

The angel, the messenger of God, says:

"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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

And Joseph wakes from the dream and does as the Angel commands...

A messenger of God comes to an ordinary man and invites him, calls him, maybe even commands him to do an extraordinary thing. It is as if the angel is saying to Joseph, the shy quiet kid on the sidelines, "Nope, do not gracefully bail on this, it is time Joseph for you to go big and not go home."

Go against your inclinations, your anticipated trajectory, move past where you feel comfortable and make history, be a lead character in changing your world, our world, this

world's future course. You, Joseph, have the possibility of a starring role in creating a way for the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, to move from a hoped for dream to an incarnated reality.

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call him Emmanuel', which means 'God is with us'". (Matthew 1:23)*

Joseph did this because an angel, a messenger of God, makes this hope palpable.

An angel of God or in the original Greek *angelos*, which means messenger of God or bringer of good news a messenger of God facilitates Joseph's evolution from a fine fellow on the sidelines to a man using all he has to bring about God's hope and longing to fruition in our world.

I ask you to hold for a minute, that image of a messenger of God, calling Joseph to work far beyond his imaginings and listen to these words from the *Book of Common Prayer* in the ordination service for a deacon:

You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.

The bishop says to ordinand, says to the person standing in front of her, "You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known to all with whom you come in contact, by what you do and how you act. You, my brother deacon, you my sister deacon, you are to make known to the church all that the world needs, all that world fears, all for which the world longs. You my sibling in Christ, are to be God's messenger, God's emissary, an *angelos* in the world.

I propose to you here today, that deacons have the theological charge and the ontological charism to be messengers of God, calling all of us, fine folks on the sidelines of life, well and beyond our zones of comfort to places of leadership creating and enacting audacious systemic change and transformation. I propose that deacons, like the angels of old are to call us to make change happen, to lead us, coax us to make Christ's redemptive, redeeming, rescuing, emancipating, liberating love known.

How?

Which brings me to the Venerable Deacon Tim Spannaus, our cathedral deacon and my archdeacon whose ministry we mark in our Cathedral today;

Tim, for you and for all of your sibling deacons your call is to preach the gospel, live the gospel so that we who hear and see you, can readily imagine something more, a different world, where the least and the lost are not just acknowledged and accepted but longed for and sought after.

A world where you will strive to not only be the good Samaritan who tends to the wounds of the man who is beat up on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, but to also be the ones who continually pose the questions to all of us,

“Why do people keep getting beat up on that road? Why is that road so dangerous?

What are you, good people doing to fix those roads, and ensure such things as this no longer happen?

What are you good people doing so that our youngest and most vulnerable will not accidentally die from unsecured misused guns?

What are you on the sidelines doing to ensure that all who work will have a living wage?

That we who are people of faith will go out of our way to use our resources to welcome the refugees and displaced persons of our world.

What are you doing, how are we acting? Asking the questions to people like us, who are so much like Joseph, righteous and thoughtful but perfectly happy to walk away and let something or someone go, because it's all suddenly gotten complex and complicated and well far past our zones of comfort.”

Deacons, Angels, Messengers of God are charged to call us to move from the passive shadows of the sidelines of acceptance to the frontlines of audacious hope and change.

Tim, that is your call, in this our Cathedral, it is your call to embody as your lead our other deacons of our diocese.

It is our hope for you and for our world, that your ministry with and among us will call us to actions that enable prophecies to become realities, reminding us always that we are not and never have been in this alone for:

“A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

So it is, and so it was, and so it shall be forevermore.

Amen.