

Christmas: A Doorway From Shame to Hope
Third in an Advent Series
Matthew 1:18-24
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Intro

Join me in this familiar children's rhyme:
Sticks and stones may break my bones
But words will never hurt me.

If that is true then the following words will not bother you.

If you were a better teacher, your students wouldn't be failing. If you were a better parent you kids wouldn't be in trouble. If you were a better musician, employee, pastor, coach, friend, colleague.

If you hadn't messed it up. If you took better care of yourself. If you'd paid more attention. If you had done it right the first time.

If you were a better daughter or son, you would call more often, visit more often. If you were a better sister or brother, you would forgive them, you would help more. If you were a better spouse it wouldn't be so hard.

If they really knew what you thought. If they could see who you really are.

It's not that complicated. If you just prayed harder. Had more faith. Trusted God more. ...But words will never hurt me.

I get why that little phrase came to exist, but truly, who are we kidding? We know that words DO hurt. Words shape how we relate to the rest of the world and the people in it. Words shape our identity and how we understand ourselves. We know words have lasting effects.

I am confident that everyone here can remember a moment or experience when words made a difference in their life, how they viewed a situation, or how they reacted in a certain circumstance. Words can be the difference between a good day and a bad one, between laughter rising up and filling a room, or tears falling softly when no one is watching. Words can be the difference between I believe in you and I can't believe you let this happen.

Words have a lasting impact on our emotional stability, mental capability, and spiritual capacity. The words we hear throughout our lives make a difference in the words and messages we tell ourselves for the rest of our lives. And this includes the words and messages we hear and we tell ourselves about God; what we *believe / think* about God, what we *feel* about God, and what we come to understand about our relationship with God.

When those words are positive, encouraging, empowering, affirming, and helpful, even if they are difficult to hear, people tend to thrive, mature, and carry a stable sense of self and develop a healthy sense of spirituality and faith. When those words are negative, traumatic, hurtful, dismissive, or criticizing, even if they weren't intended that way, people tend to fail to thrive, and develop a shame based sense of spirituality and faith. Words can fill us with shame and words can fill us with hope.

The good news dear church, is that Christmas is our doorway from shame to hope.

Prayer - Dear God, may we, in this moment, have ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts that are open to the words that matter most; your words of wisdom and truth.

Sermon

We live in a world that feeds off the power of shame and it has been that way since things fell apart in the Garden with Adam and Eve. It was shame and doubt that the serpent planted in the mind of Eve when she and Adam were faced with the decision about eating the fruit. It was shame, fear, and envy that came between Cain and Abel. It was shame that plagued Abram and Sarai when they couldn't have children and led Sara to tell Abram to sleep with her maid in order to have children. Shame and jealousy drove a wedge between Jacob and Esau. Shame

convinced Moses he could not be the leader God wanted him to be. Shame held captive countless men and women throughout the bible. Shame continues to be a key part in perpetuating the lie that we live in a world of lack; that there is never enough, we don't have enough, we can't get enough. It is the underlying message that we ourselves are never enough for the world, we can't do enough to fix or change things. We are undeserving of some things but most deserving of other things like criticism, judgment, and ridicule.

When we look at the story of Jesus' birth and in order to more fully understand its impact, we cannot ignore the shame surrounding the people directly and indirectly involved. We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that the most life-changing, beautiful story ever told contains elements of pain, fear, shame, and unknowing. Perhaps it is for that very reason that the story of Jesus' birth never gets old and always has something new to teach us.

This week, we stand at the doorway between shame and hope. To help us understand what it means to walk across this threshold - to walk through this door of Christmas, we look to the experience of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father.

There isn't actually much known about Joseph. Joseph's story is only found in the gospel of Mathew and Luke. Mark and John make no mention of Joseph and his role in the birth narrative. The reference in Luke comes only after the description of what is called, "the great announcement" when Mary encounters the angel, which Joseph was not a part of. Luke identifies Joseph only after things work out between him and Mary and they are on the way to Bethlehem. Matthew, on the other hand, tries to fill in a few gaps and tells us that Joseph had his own angel encounter.

To set the scene, Mary, a young unmarried but engaged woman somewhere between 14 - 18 yrs of age received word that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive and bear a son to be named Jesus who will rule over all the nations. If you were a 15, 16, 17 year old girl in Nazareth at the time this message was received, it is not something you post on Instagram, Facebook, or make a Tik-Tok video for all the world to see. You wouldn't dare. So I can't imagine Mary running up and down the streets proclaiming, "guess what?!" She would be

publicly humiliated, shunned from her family, and all arrangements with Joseph and his family would be null and void. I can't even imagine it's the kind of news she ran to share with Joseph, even though they were betrothed, which in their culture meant, their parents arranged the marriage years earlier, and they were waiting out the engagement period. In the eyes of the law they were not yet married but in the eyes of the family and community they were. How would she face Joseph? His family? What would it do to their relationship? What would he think of his young bride coming up pregnant when they had never been together? How would he respond? Matthew provides us the answer.

Read Text: SLIDE of Matt. 1:18-24 MSG

Do you remember Mary's first words when the angel told her she would have a son? "How can this be?!" I imagine Joseph had the same question...how could this happen? Why him? Why her? Why now? What does this mean?

We don't know how long Mary waited to tell Joseph, but she eventually does and I wonder what happened the afternoon and evening after Mary told Joseph. Maybe I have seen too many movies, have a hollywood bent, or maybe it is because I read the story through today's lens, but I don't think Joseph swept Mary into his arms, twirled her around, sat her down on the chaise lounge, gazed to her eyes and said, "Oh Mary, its o.k., we will figure this out, all that matters is that you are o.k.. Who cares what everyone else thinks, this is about you and me, we will sit down, have a family meeting and work it all out, I'm sure our parents and my job will completely understand and offer support."

On the contrary, everything was at risk of falling apart under the hand of private and public shame and humiliation. Joseph faced a huge decision and carried a massive weight on his shoulders. He was a carpenter, his job was to build and fix things but how do you fix this?

The emotions were certainly all over the place; disbelief, anger, confusion, doubt, and yet love, care, honor for this young woman he was to marry and her family. He was, we are told, a good, noble, and devout / believing man. I imagine it felt like a wrestling match between his head and his heart. Maybe you can relate.

The pressure must have been palpable in the room as he laid down to try and sleep that night. The text tells us that before finally closing his eyes, Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary quietly and do what he could to take care of the situation with little attention or uproar. That was his way out, or so he thought.

But God was all in and had other plans.

I don't think God had other plans because God thought Joseph was wrong or that he was doing the wrong thing or had the wrong motives, but because God wanted to show Joseph (and Mary) that what God puts in motion, shame cannot stop. God wanted to show Joseph and Mary and the community that what God was doing was bigger than them and beyond the immediate.

The angel's words gave the direction and certainty Joseph needed to open the door and walk from shame to hope. A hope born of the Holy Spirit. A hope centered in the God of all those who came before him. A hope found in God's faithfulness. A hope that was bigger than the two of them, and was in fact for the whole world. A hope given by the God who created all things, is in all things, and is all things. A hope that would confront shame not with power, violence, and control but with vulnerability.

Here is what you need to know about shame: it cannot be beaten by just trying harder, doing more, working longer, or having more. You cannot outrun shame by staying busy, distracting yourself, or throwing yourself into another project. You cannot silence shame by making more noise or with more recognition, applause, status, or accolades. When all is said and done, in the quiet of the night, in the calm between the storms, or in the empty noise of a car ride, a hotel room, or the walk on your favorite trail, shame makes itself known.

And in the story of Joseph, it was speaking loud and clear: What were you thinking? What kind of man are you? Who do you think you are? Who is going to hire you now? Do you realize what this does to your family and extended family? So much for answered prayers and deep faith. Must not be enough. Joseph could not silence this shame by raising his voice in anger or defense, gathering together his closest comrades and coworkers and lead a violent and

public rampage. That would only perpetuate what shame wanted...to destroy what God was doing. Shame seeks to destroy your identity as a child of God and anything God may be doing in and through you.

Joseph had to become completely vulnerable, recognizing his limitations, realizing he could do nothing but trust the words of the angel, and surrender control to the God he put his faith in; the God who would provide for his every need along the coming journey. He was indeed standing on the threshold between shame and hope.

Perhaps you have been there. Perhaps you are there now. What words does shame use to stir the kettle of your worries or turn the heat up on your questions, fears, and doubts? What words seem to shine a shame spotlight on your mistakes, shortcomings, or regrets? Words like: You should know better. You should trust God more. You should have said something - not said anything. You really don't think you can do this do you? You must have done something wrong to be in this situation.

Joseph invites us to open the same door he did long ago; the door that leads us from shame to hope. Where do you need hope in your life this Christmas? What parts of your life have been wounded by words of shame? When have you heard yourself ask, like Joseph did, "How can this be?" How can your words speak hope into the lives of others?

Perhaps your Joseph moment is now. Perhaps you feel the weight of a decision or choice to be made. The impact your choices have made or will make on those around you. The burden of not knowing what to do. The pressure of messing up or making a mistake. You feel the wrestling match between your head and your heart. You want to do the good and right thing.

Joseph didn't have all the answers. He didn't figure it all out before he spoke to Mary. He stood as emotionally and spiritually naked as the baby God was about to bring into the world. Joseph found a way to trust that God would get him through the door. Dear God, may we do the same. Amen