

Kneeling on Feeble Knees  
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Advent 3A

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Isaiah 35:1-10  
Matthew 1:18-25

“Strengthen the weak knees,” the prophet proclaimed in Isaiah. I haven’t taken an official count, but anecdotally, after 17 years of ordained ministry, can you guess what surgery has given me the most hospital visits to parishioners?

That’s right, it’s knee surgery. That’s why when I go to the gym and the workout of the day has me doing lunges, I tell my quads that even though this movement does not spark joy in the present, perhaps my future knees will thank me. Then again, maybe not– but at least, should the day come when I do need a knee consultation, I can trust I will have church people point me toward the best knee surgeons around.

I imagine Joseph had weak knees the day he realized that the teenage woman– or maybe we should say girl– promised to him for marriage was pregnant, before they had officially consummated their relationship. His knees weren’t weak because of a meniscus tear, or a lack of cartilage. His knees were weak because he was trembling in fear. He did not know whether to bow... or to bolt. A rigid, patriarchal culture taught that righteousness meant sexual purity, and so his first reaction upon discovering Mary’s pregnancy was to quietly dismiss her– that way, his reputation would not be tainted, and *if* Mary could find a way to finish this pregnancy and deliver this baby under the protective secrecy of family, then maybe her reputation– and even her life– could be spared. That’s what righteousness meant under the culture of Joseph’s time.

The prophet in Isaiah promised that God would “strengthen the weak knees.” The prophet also claimed that “the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” I don’t know about you, but I have noticed that the deer in this area are especially frisky. I’ve heard it’s the tail-end of the rutting season for deer. They release a musky perfume. They rub up against trees, peeling away the bark and leaving behind their scent like a kind of deer Tinder app. And then, driven by the drive to mate, the buck barely eats or sleeps as he looks for a fertile doe– and once he finds her, he prances in hot pursuit of the coupling that will lead to a birth 7 months later. My friend’s dad was driving on the Palisades Parkway earlier this month when a deer popped out of the woods, right onto the car in front of him. The deer slid over the roof of that car, and slammed right into the window of his car. Thankfully he emerged with just a few cuts and bruises– and, thanks to the newly installed dashcam on his Jeep, a jaw-dropping video of the whole thing. I saw him on Friday while I was walking in town, and he played the whole thing for me in slow motion; the deer spun 4 times around as its body hurtled through

space and into his windshield. I can only imagine how weak-kneed my friend's dad was as he emerged from the wreckage.

God wanted to break through to our world with as much drive as a deer in its rut. Nothing was stopping God. Could Joseph be part of this entry, and emerge unscathed? Choosing to bow with weak knees was risky, and the truth was that he probably didn't emerge unscathed. The Bible omits much of his story, but we can imagine his journey included struggle and heartbreak as he became a surrogate father for this chosen son. Struggle, heartache, but I suspect there was great joy there too.

I attended a wedding in the past year of someone with weak knees. Her knees weren't weak because she was uncertain about the wedding. She had met this man more than 5 years back, and they had fallen in love. However, 3 years into their dating life, she suffered a massive stroke. She had been in a coma for several weeks and we didn't know if she would even make it. But she did— and slowly but surely, her personality, and her speech, returned to her. She gained control over body parts that had been paralyzed. She learned to walk, all over again. As she came back into herself, the love was still there. She and her boyfriend became engaged and set a wedding date for a year later. Then, the pandemic came. So the wedding got pushed away for another 2 years. She was absolutely glowing when she headed down the aisle, leaning for support on her father's arm, finally, at last, meeting her beloved at the altar. It was perfect.

But then, the priest gave a homily talking about how easily the groom could have discarded his bride when she became sick and disabled. He actually said that the man could have found a stronger, healthier bride. And then the priest went on to say that this groom showed the love of Christ because he did not discard this woman when she was weak.

I was appalled. The priest said nothing about how clever or funny the bride is— and she really is, if he had bothered getting to know her. He never said anything about the gifts she brings to the marriage. He never said anything of the value of her love. Even though this woman standing at the altar physically had weak knees, it was the priest who was the weak one in his proclamation of what love looks like: a love that can stand on weak knees, look through struggle and heartache, yes— but that can also see joy.

Part of what makes Joseph's story ring so true is that we all have weak knees in our journey of faith, from time to time at least if not always. One of the powerful things about being part of a community is that even when we are weak-kneed about what is good, or faithful, or compassionate, or just, we belong to a people larger than ourselves. This community enables us to have dreams beyond the limits of our understanding— just as the angel who appeared to Joseph did.

Can you imagine Joseph, the night he learned of Mary's pregnancy? I imagine him tossing and turning, as his mind flipped through all the possible ways Mary could have become pregnant and all the possible ways he could dismiss her. I imagine his stomach ached as he considered

his options. Hopefully he realized how advantaged he was, to at least have options. Sometimes it is right in that moment when wakefulness yields to sleep that the mind relaxes enough to give birth to an idea that is new. This is how the angel came to Joseph. When hearing the angel's message: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit," did he transition from a fitful sleep to a peaceful sleep? Did he wake up emboldened, filled with courage as he prepared to stand up for Mary and his family? Or was he terrified each step of the way toward Bethlehem?

I wonder if there is significance that Joseph, who steps in as father to Jesus, bears the same name as Joseph, the dreamer in the Hebrew Bible— you know, the one whose dreams told the story of famine,

Here is what the prophet had promised to God's people in one of their weakest moments: "Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." This third Sunday of advent is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, which means "Joyful" Sunday. Henri Nouwen puts it this way: while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. **"Joy," he writes, "is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away."**

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The biblical definition of angel has less to do with chubby, naked cherubs, or long, bright, white robes with wings and halos, and more to do with being a messenger from God. But it turns out, there are lots of messengers out there, and not a lot of them are from God. They are messages that say your only value is through your work. Messages that say you aren't smart enough, aren't worthy enough, aren't fitting the norm for physical beauty. There are messages that speak to what kinds of people should hold power— and these messages expand the gap between rich and poor, between who is free and who is oppressed, and allow too much of the world to be left forgotten.

I suspect that it is because Joseph was rooted in this understanding of God's unconditional love that emboldened him to listen to the message coming from the angel's voice— which was a message from God, unlike the messages of culture that said he should cut his losses and run. He may have been feeble-kneed, but at that point he chose to bow rather than bolt.

I realize that many of you are feeble-kneed about faith. Maybe it's easier to say what you *don't* believe in, than what you do. Go ahead and hold onto your questions about beliefs and practices. But hold onto this. There *is* a greater love out there, and we are called to take part in it, even make it the axis by which we operate. With that as our center of gravity, we become more willing to take on risks that lead us to connection rather than self-isolation, generosity rather than greed, justice rather than jealousies, and bowing when we are in the presence of something holy happening, rather than bolting. Maybe, we will even discover... joy.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Salt* lectionary blog for December 11, 2022