

Hope Is Worth the Risk  
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It is fitting that an angel should appear to Joseph in a dream, to disrupt his plan to quietly dismiss his pregnant girlfriend and avoid social shame, or worse, for the both of them. Unlike the Hallmark characterization of angels, which is something between a fairy godmother and a protective nanny, biblical angels most often had the role of delivering a message. They could come in a dream, or a vision, or just show up. Joseph, who carried with his name the legacy of Joseph in the Hebrew Bible— that dreamer whose dreams stirred up trouble with his brothers, and whose dreams helped him predict a drought and save Egypt and the surrounding region from famine— received an important message from God through an angel. The angel advised Joseph to not be afraid. That the Holy Spirit conceived the child in Mary’s womb. His name should be Jesus, and he will save the people from their sins. And like the prophet foretold, the child’s name should also be Emmanuel, which means “God-with-us.”

Waking and clearing his eyes from sleep, Joseph did exactly as the angel commanded him. He stayed with Mary, and parented the baby, whom they named Jesus— in Hebrew, *Yeshua*, which means “God saves.”

I wonder if Joseph had anything that awakened in him, in particular, that helped him say yes! to what the angel was saying. Was it his nature to just go along with whatever God said? Or did he, too, have a special yearning for the world to become a better place? For salvation to be born among the people?

His ancestor and namesake generations before once saved the people from famine, when he warned Pharaoh to save all the grain in storehouses from seven years of plenty, because his dream had told him that following those years when the trees hung heavy with olives and figs and the vines were plump with grapes, when the grain fields danced with row upon row of wheat stalks bowing to the sun and the rain that nourished them up from the soil, there would be seven more years when the rains would not come, when the trees would stand barren, the vineyards and the fields would be empty. Thanks to Joseph, Egypt was prepared

for those years of famine, and in fact they had stored up so much that even faraway nations came to Egypt to find the food they needed to survive.

So perhaps Joseph knew something about the generosity of God's salvation. I do not know what Joseph may have needed saving from. Was it his own jealousy of Mary's mysterious pregnancy? Was it his fear for himself and his people living under the oppressive rule of Rome? Had he cried out in the dark, Lord, save us!? Maybe Joseph didn't even know what he, or his people, needed saving from. But the story of the salvation offered through his ancestor Joseph's dreams was so fruitful and generous, that Joseph knew that if he ever was given a holy dream, he must not diminish its importance.

I was once in need of salvation, when I got an important message. I was heading home after my first visit to a therapist, following my mom's sudden death. My grief was still in a place where I could talk about what had happened, but my words could not find their way to the emotions I needed to feel over what had happened. And I had just spent an hour talking to a stranger, trying to find my way from facts to feelings. Leaving the therapist's office, I trudged up the stairs to the Chicago El train, which I would take back home. Even the trains coming and going— a couple passed that weren't mine— made me flinch, because the shaking of the platform disoriented me, and in my new reality, tragedy was no longer unexpected. I stepped further away from the tracks, and clung to the railing on the far side of the platform. As I waited for my green train, a man about my same age, but bald and wearing glasses, approached me, and caught my eye. He asked me, "Do you believe that one person can be the bearer of happiness so contagious that it spills out to everyone around?"

Surely he wasn't talking to me. But there was no one beside me. I eyed him suspiciously, and gauged the distance of the oncoming train. Whoosh. Once the train safely passed us and screeched to a halt, I answered. "Yeah, sure." In that moment, I did not believe in such contagious happiness; I just wanted to get him to leave me alone. These were words, in that moment, that I was not sure my emotions would ever find their way to feeling again.

But then the man opened a box I had not even noticed he had. In it were 3 origami birds. He smiled at me and silently gestured for me to take one. I felt like a cat as I scooped a crumpled bird out of its paper box nest, clutching it tightly

between two fingers lest unknown substance like anthrax or weirdness seep out and infect me, my house, or my family.

“Ding dong!” The doors opened— at last it was my green train— and I found my seat on the bench. As the train pulled away from the station, the man still stood on the platform, grinning at me through the window. I placed the bird on the seat next to me— and at the next station, a woman lowered her seat onto that baby bird of happiness. In the moment I felt relieved. But though I wasn’t ready for its power yet, the message of the bird stayed with me. In time, facts and feelings connected once again. Emotions like sadness and fear, hope and joy, moved in and out of me in healthy ways. And I found that indeed, one person can be the bearer of happiness so contagious that it spills out to everyone around. I would not always be the bearer of such happiness. But sometimes I would find myself in proximity of a person like that. And sometimes, I can even be that person. And when that happens, I remember the prophecy of that strange man and his bird. Maybe he was an angel.

Maybe you know today the salvation you seek for your life, or for the world. Maybe you hope for it. Or maybe, right now, it feels too risky to hope. Maybe you can say the words that tell of the good news promised in Advent, and unwrapped on Christmas: that God is with us, that the lion shall lie down with the lamb, that God’s salvation is upon us. But maybe these are just words, and too far a reach for you to risk hoping for in real life.

What is the landscape of your life? Where are the rough places? What have you not even dared to hope because to do so feels too risky? I will not tell you that God is a magician. God can’t make your beloved pet come back to life, or stop global warming. I mean, maybe God *can* do these things, but to live in a world where God stops death, or keeps a hand on the thermostat— well, a world like that would be a different experience than the vulnerability of what living is. Instead of crafting an artificial perfection, God crawled into the vulnerability of the world, entering in a human body— Jesus— birthed with grunting and breathing, pushing and crying from Mary’s own body. In Jesus, we know that God makes the connection between the words we pray to God, and the feelings that embody our prayers: our hunger, our pain, our loneliness, our grief— but also our delight, our joy, our hope, our love. In Jesus, we know God-with-us.

Mary understood the power of that connection. In her song, she proclaimed, indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his child Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Nikki Giovanni, the black American poet who died last week, wrote a poem called “Dreams.”

“in my younger years  
before i learned  
black people aren’t  
suppose to dream”

Giovanni wrote, she dreamed of becoming a raelet. The Raelettes were a girl group from the 1950’s, who were the backup singers for Ray Charles. She imagined she would grind up against the mic and scream, “baaaaaby nightandday

baaaaaby nightandday” like Marjorie Hendrix did. But instead, she wrote, “i grew and matured

i became more sensible

and decided i would

settle down

and just become

a sweet inspiration.

The irony is that Nikki Giovanni could have been described as a number of things, but a “sweet inspiration” is probably not the first phrase people would use to tell her story. She was a star of black nationalism. She was a revolutionary.

The words of her poetry lent pathways to connecting with the emotional

experience of tragic injustices like the murders of Emmett Till and the four Black girls in the Birmingham church bombing – but her words also gave pathways to the emotional experience and beauty of black joy and black love.

Mary often gets remembered as a “sweet inspiration” but that depiction misses how radical Mary’s words were. In Mary’s song, she bore the hope of a promise fulfilled. In fact, though there were still hungry and poor people around her, and proud, powerful people who would continue to oppress, she sang her song as if, in God’s mercy, these injustices were already overturned and she laid out an intention Christians today should seek to follow.

Believing these things are possible may seem as ludicrous as handing out paper birds of happiness to a daughter deep in grief on a train platform. And maybe these promises feel too distant for you to risk believing now. But the advantage of being part of a church community is that you do not have to be the one with that much belief. Chances are, you are sitting near someone with so much belief in them that it will spill out, with hope, with peace, with love, with joy so contagious that it will slosh out and infect everyone around. And chances are, even if you are not that person today, the day is surely coming when you get to be that person for once, maybe longer.

Just as Joseph of Nazareth could look back to the story of Joseph in Egypt, and draw enough faith to follow his dream as the earlier Joseph has done, we can also look to Joseph and to Mary when we are lacking in hope or faith, or afraid to follow when God sends us a message or a dream.

I want to close with this Blessing:

Lies of cynicism are loud, and so are the voices of others—but, beloved, hope is worth

fighting for. May the Spirit of God surround you this season so that you might trust like Joseph and sing like Mary. The same hope they held is still alive today, transforming creation into God's will for justice and peace. As you prepare your heart for Christ’s arrival, may you make room for God’s presence, and may your actions reflect God’s hope for humanity.