

"Our Invitation"

When someone tells you that they have a piece of good and bad news. Which one do you usually prefer to hear first? I prefer to hear the bad one first, so that I can take the hit and work through the negativity of the bad one, and then be ready to rejoice and savor the good news. For me, it's like New Year's candy. I grew up in Russia, and Christmas comes on January 6th and it is a very religious holiday where people go to church and might sit around the tables. So all the gifts, commotion, hecticness, plans and recipes, and candy, basically all we do here for Christmas - all of that comes at New Year's Eve in Russia. When I was 9 or 10 years old, my mom worked as a nurse at an outpatient rehab center. And every year the rehab gave their workers who had children under 18 years old special New Year's boxes of candy. So my mom received two boxes of candy, one for me and one for my brother. The box was beautiful and had all kinds of candy, chocolate, and fruit, and with nuts. When I received the box I opened it up and emptied the box to see all the candy. Then I had a method of how I was going to eat all the candy. I put all of my favorite ones aside: those that had nuts and fruit in them. And then I put together all the chocolate candy and others that I did not like. I ate all the bad ones first and saved all the good ones for last. Do not get me wrong, I didn't eat all the candy in one sitting! It probably took me a day or two. I ate all the bad ones first, so that I could cherish and truly enjoy the good ones. I would savor them, tasting how good they were, just like the good news that I would receive after hearing the bad one.

So today we read from Matthew's Gospel, the beginning of the story of Jesus's birth. It is the one without shepherds but with the Magi. Jesus' mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. So I imagine Mary saying to Joseph, "Guess what Joseph, I have good and bad news for you." Which one do you want to hear first?" "The good news is that I am pregnant. The bad news is that you are not the father of the baby." If we step back, we could see how the whole thing would have been pretty bad news for Joseph. It would be a big dilemma. When he

received this news the text says they were engaged. Scholars say in Jesus' times the engagement or betrothal could have lasted for a year or so. The engagement was considered even more official than the marriage ceremony itself because it was a legal way to assure that the two young people would become a family. Throughout the history of Ancient Israel there was a practice of the father of the groom giving a sum of money or a gift to the father of the bride to ensure that they will be together and to compensate that family because they would lose a member of the family who would be helpful in their household or family business. Some sources say that the groom also had to get a gift to his bride. Just like here in the States the groom is supposed to give an engagement ring worth two months of his salary.

So we know that Mary and Joseph were engaged. Were they in love? Possibly. We know that the marriages were not arranged based on romantic feelings between a future bride and a groom. It was really an arrangement between families. So, we do not know if Joseph truly loved Mary. Whether he loved her or not, he could have taken this whole pregnancy thing as a betrayal. He would have been crushed and disappointed. The marriage was arranged, the price was paid, his future was before him. Not only that, he and his family would also be subject to public dishonor and shame because of this out of wedlock pregnancy. All of this sounds like bad news.

It is Advent and it is two days before Christmas. And we are not used to bad news in this time of the year. It is a holly jolly time, the most wonderful time of the year. It is about the lights and Christmas trees and decorations. It is about baking and cooking favorite recipes. It is about giving each other gifts. And all of this is supposed to be good and joyful. But we live in a world that does not depend on the church calendar to announce bad news to us. Life happens, we say. We could receive bad news even in this joyful time of the year. And this year, this season of Advent became a season of bad news for my and Josh's family, and for many members of our congregation. Bad news kept coming: deaths of our congregation members, hospice, illness, cancer, death of the members of our congregation families. This Advent has been very different for me. The bad news just kept coming and kept pressing on me. But it also made me go to God in prayer more and question God more. For the first time I actually thought of a

deeper meaning of Advent. What does this season bring to us, let's set aside all the commercial stuff (which is so good, don't get me wrong) ? but spiritually? But what does this season bring to those who receive bad news in this time of the year? What does this season bring to those whose hearts are hurting and grieving? What does this season bring for those who are hungry, who are without homes, for those who are in prison, for those who are dying?

From time to time I listen to a podcast called "Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership" by Ruth Haley Barton, an author, spiritual director, and a teacher. And this week's episode on the fourth Sunday of Advent, Ruth Haley Barton reminded the listeners and me what Advent is all about. She said (quote), "Advent is the season when we practice waiting; when we pay attention to our deepest longings and the dark places in our lives and we hold them open before God and wait for Jesus to come into those places of our lives." So, in Advent we wait, wait for presence, for all of it to be over, healing, for relief from pain, for next paycheck, for a relationship to be mended, for suffering to stop. We wait.

I believe that Joseph had to wait too. Even though like a good and solid guy, he decided to let Mary go quietly. But I can imagine him still waiting, waiting for some clarification, for understanding of the situation, for some good news in this mess, for God to show up to him. We know that God did. The angel came to him in a dream and announced the good news about the baby that Mary was pregnant with. That this baby would save the world from their sins. This baby would shine light into the darkness, would bring hope to those in despair, bring healing to the broken hearted, would show and live the love that God has for the world and through this baby we will never be separated from the love of God even in death. The good news that this baby would be Emmanuel, God with us. The good news that we would never be abandoned, we would never be left alone. Joseph's bad news of his pregnant fiancée turned into the good news for the whole world. Joseph's bad news turned into good news for all of us.

So, our invitation today on this Fourth Sunday of Advent is to wait, wait for the good news of God to enter into our hearts once more or maybe for the first time at Christmas. We wait for hope, for faith, for peace, for healing, for love, for harmony. And we wait, maybe in an uncomfortable, dark place, maybe in a cheerful one, maybe in a hopeful one.

Friends, it is only two days before Christmas. I understand you all have some things to do and finish up and I do too. But in the next two days try to find time and space to sit with God (it could be in a car, on a walk, in the morning sitting in your favorite chair with a cup of coffee, or when you go to sleep) and when you sit with God, open up to God those deepest longings and darkest places, and bad news in your life. Ask for Jesus to come into those places, and when Christmas comes, receive the good news, ponder it, and savor it. Amen.