

December 21,

What do you fear?

When you're afraid, give me your hand

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"I am with you" by Lauren Wright Pittman | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org

Inspired by Isaiah 41:5-10, 11"x14" Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Sermon

We are living in fearful times. It's a different kind of fear, for sure, but we have been afraid before. Maybe afraid during the civil rights movement. Or during the riots in LA in 1990. Or throughout the cold war, wondering who might push THE BUTTON first. Or during Vietnam, wondering if friends or family members would return. And now we find ourselves in another time of fear when we fear perhaps for ourselves, and certainly for our neighbors. We open the news or listen to public radio and hear fearful stories that feel not too far from home. Because sometimes they aren't.

We know that fear is not new to the human experience. There are places that have lived in fear more than not around the world. In Palestine or in South Sudan. In our own country's cities and in small towns in countries south of us who are overrun by cartels.

As we have spent time in our advent story, we have talked about the fear that the prophet Jeremiah felt. We have also talked about the fear Mary felt—a young, unwed, pregnant woman with no recognized status. A young, unwed, pregnant woman, who, when told she would be the mother of God, questioned the possibility, then moved to acceptance and, ran to seek the wisdom and company and protection of her older cousin, Elizabeth.

In today's story, we hear of Joseph, who is betrothed to Mary. Admittedly, Joseph gets very little screen time in this whole Jesus story, but that doesn't mean that his role was unimportant. Rather, he is fairly critical to the survival of baby Jesus. But he almost lifted right out of our story. Almost.

In the first chapter of the book of Matthew, we are told that Joseph had in mind to divorce Mary quietly. This is, and I have preached about in other years in other places,, a gracious approach to the situation since an adulterous affair was punishable by stoning for a woman. Clearly Joseph loved her and wanted to save her from death.

But it is also most certainly true that Joseph was fearful. To walk toward Mary, pregnant with a child that was not his, was unthinkable. It would bring such shame on him . . . the social and religious cost to his reputation would be extraordinary. His fear is certainly logical.

And then an angel breaks in and calls him by name. The first thing the angel tells Joseph is not to be afraid. And I gotta think that if the first thing an angel says is not to be afraid, you should probably be very, very afraid! Or at least you already have been!

But in the midst of his well-founded fear, Joseph is able to hear the angel. Amazingly, he is able to hear the angel's words, and take them to heart. Joseph is able to see beyond his own situation and beyond his own fear. Despite his fear, he gives his hand to Mary.

He gives her his hand and with it, comes so much. She is granted is companionship, his protection, and his partnership. She knows at that moment that she will not have to walk this journey alone. Though Joseph likely didn't have much social status being a carpenter and likely doing piecework, he had

the advantage that being male automatically afforded in that time and culture. By giving her his hand, she would not be nearly as estranged from society. He is not seeking to be her savior. What Joseph offers is accompaniment. He is telling Mary that she doesn't have to do this alone.

Mary was clearly in a fearful space. Despite her song of trust, she almost certainly had times of rising fear. And she had to know that Joseph had considered divorcing her. *But* Mary took Joseph's hand. She *chose* to grant him her trust. To trust him with her safety and with the life and care of her yet-to-be-born child. Each of them chose to accept the other as a partner in whatever was to come.

What if when they did so, they used the same words. "Give me your hand." It's a phrase that can be either a plea for help or a gesture of support. "Give me your hand" might be something we say when someone has fallen so you can help them up. Or "give me your hand" might be something you say when you are the one who has fallen and are in need of assistance. Through the course of life . . . and perhaps even through the course of any given day or week, we might find ourselves on either

side...the one needing a hand or giving a hand. And it is the reaching toward one another that disempowers our fear.

The key for us this week, is to remember to that we are stronger together. We are stronger when, instead of letting our fears isolate us, we allow them to unite us. We allow them to bring us together, reaching for one another.

Already you all are doing this. I have seen the deacons reaching out to people in the congregation whom they know need extra care or checking in on. If you find yourself in need of such, you can let a deacon or the office know. Sometimes we need to ask for someone to give us their hand.

Together, then, we think about how we offer our hands to others. Joseph offered what power and privilege he had as a male member of society to Mary. For us, we must think about how we wield our privilege.

It sounds ridiculous in so many ways. We don't often think about our power and privilege. When we read the news, we feel *powerless* rather than *powerful*.

In Mary's time, she lived under the imperial rule of Herod. And here she is gestating One who is to be called King of the Jews.

Herod responds as imperial rulers do—with deception, surveillance, and, after Jesus' birth, with violence. In contrast, God responds always with dreams, courage, and embodied resistance.

Let me close by quoting the Rev. Buyong Lee who writes for Sanctified Art:

“God’s work in the world unfolds not through lone heroes,
but through the joined hands of those who choose:
 relationship over self-protection,
 accompaniment over certainty,
 and presence over perfection.

Mary’s ‘yes’ mattered.

So did Joseph’s.

So does ours.

As we move into the final days of Advent, we ask:

Who among us is carrying something sacred and heavy,
quietly in danger?

What fear might we be called to move through—not for our
sake, but for the sake
of others?

How might our love—fragile, imperfect, but real—become
the ground where God’s promise takes root?

This week, we’re not asked to fix
the world.

We’re asked to take each other’s hands
and walk forward into it—together.” Amen.