

Hold On Tight

When I started writing my message for this morning, I realized that there was a much better title than the one I put in the bulletin. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to change the title—if you're a little OCD like me, you might even want to take a pen and cross out what's printed in the program—and write instead: “Hold On Tight.”

“Hold on tight.” This time of year, I think of my parents' words when we went tobogganing. “Hold on tight.” In Webster where I grew up, the best place to go is Webster park, down by the lake. Well, not along the lake, but on the other side of the road, where there's a tremendous hill. Now, I'm the oldest of 5 children. So, my parents would get us all situated on the toboggan, and they'd yell, “Hold on tight,” and then we'd start sliding down the hill, slowly at first, then picking up speed, now racing down the slope, breathless with excitement, totally out of control, hitting all the bumps, flying through the air...

That's a lot of fun as a child, but it's a whole different story as we get older, and the toboggan rides are not those playing outdoors on a sunny winter morning in the park, but rather the difficulties we face, when our life seems to be sledding out of control. So many things can put us on that path: a phone call in the middle of the night, or bad news from the doctor, or a problem at school, or the loss of a job, or a difficult situation in the family, or financial stress... whatever it is, we seem to be crashing down the mountain in the dark...

It must have felt that way for Joseph in the Bible. Joseph's life had been good. As a young man, he had just completed his apprenticeship in his father's carpenter's shop. Better yet, he was recently engaged to Mary—their wedding would be next year. They had grown up together in the small village of Nazareth—she just a few years younger than he. Their families were neighbors & friends, and often, he saw her on market day or at village festivals. What had begun as friendship had blossomed into love; she was kind and generous and filled with faith in God.

That's why he couldn't understand what had happened. She had just told him the news: she was expecting a child. “How was this possible?” he had asked—they weren't yet married; they hadn't been together yet.

Mary had explained to him that the Angel Gabriel had appeared to her, and had told her that she would have a baby, and the child would be God's own son. The baby was to be named "Jesus" (which means God saves), because he was the promised King, the promised Messiah, who would save the people and establish a kingdom of justice and peace forever. Joseph wanted to believe Mary, but it all seemed so impossible... What should he do? He could break the engagement, but that would bring shame on both of them. Maybe he could do it quietly, and move away, and start over somewhere else. Oh, he had had so many hopes and dreams for the future, and now it had all fallen apart, his life crashing out of control.

That night, as he slept, an angel appeared to Joseph. The angel spoke to him, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us).

To put it simply, the angel was saying to Joseph, "Hold on tight, Joseph.... Hold on tight."

First, Joseph needed to hold on tight to God's promise. What was that promise? That "a virgin would conceive and bear a son, and his name would be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). This is a promise that went back over 700 years before the birth of Christ, to the time of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). It was a dark period for the people of Jerusalem. The city was being attacked by an alliance of the Syrians and the northern Kingdom of Israel. God sent the prophet Isaiah to give King Ahaz a sign. And the sign was the birth of a child who would be named, "Emmanuel" (meaning, "God with us.") King Ahaz should not fear, because God would not desert them. God would remain by their side. And that's what happened. Jerusalem was spared destruction. Both Syria & the Northern Kingdom of Israel soon fell to the powerful Assyrian empire, but Jerusalem survived.

Now, this promise would find even greater fulfillment in the birth of Jesus.

Joseph believed the angel's message that Mary was the virgin of the prophecy who would give birth to God's son. Jesus would truly be "God with us." Never again would human beings struggle alone in the darkness. God had now entered human history; in Jesus, he would always be by our side. It must have been difficult for Joseph at times; naturally, doubts & fears would arise, yet, he would continually return to God's promise and trust in God's presence.

This is crucial for us as well, especially when life sends us crashing downwards—to hold on to God's promises, especially God's Emmanuel-promise. Jesus is God with us. We are not alone in our struggles. Jesus has lived on earth; he has known pain and sorrow. And he is with each one of us now, reaching out to us with understanding, strength, and love.

Then, there's a second thing we find in the angel's words to Joseph: Not only is it important for him to hold the promises, but also to hold the baby. The angel says: "Mary will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." Listen carefully to these words the angel spoke. Not... "Mary will call his name Jesus," but you, Joseph, will call his name Jesus—you will be the one to name him "Jesus." And so, we can picture Joseph, on the night when Jesus was born, there in the stable in Bethlehem, gently holding the tiny infant, enfolding the baby in his love, and whispering the name by which he would be called, "Jesus."

I love the music which Ken Dobbin sang earlier, "Joseph's Song." The words express the wonder & joy which fill Joseph's heart when he holds the baby Jesus in his arms.

For us, we too need to hold the baby. That's what's so amazing about Christmas. If it weren't for Christmas, we'd likely spend our entire life, rushing from one responsibility to another, one crisis to the next, deadline after deadline, and lose sight of what's really important. But Christmas invites us to pause, and take time to imagine what it would be like to hold the baby Jesus close.

That's why Christmas cards are especially meaningful when they depict the Christ child in the stable in Bethlehem. That's why it's so good to have a nativity set at home. As we look at this peace-filled scene, we

can reflect on God's amazing love for us, that he would send his son into our world, into our lives, as a tiny baby. Like Joseph, we hold the baby in our heart.

Then, there is a third message to Joseph from the angel: hold each other. The angel says, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife." Mary needed Joseph—his faith, his strength, his love. And Joseph needed Mary—her devotion to God, her kindness, her love. Together they would raise the Son of God; together they would face the difficulties & challenges that lay ahead. When one was feeling low, the other would provide encouragement; when one was burdened, the other would reach out in love.

When our lives seem to be sledding out of control, this is an important message for us as well: hold on tight—hold on tight to each other. Difficult times can pull us apart, but we need others, and others need us.

So, hold on tight... To the Emmanuel-promise of God... to the baby, the Christ child in the manger of Bethlehem... to one another, to the people who share your life...

A college pastor, by the name of Bill White, experienced this a few days before Christmas. Early one morning, he was kneeling in prayer in his office, which was in the front room downstairs in his home. He was going through a difficult time, and he was pouring out his anguish to God, and asking God for a blessing for that day, needing to feel loved by the Heavenly Father.

His young son, Timmy, who was 22 months old, had just gotten up, and he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Timmy had sneaked quietly into the front room. He's always quiet in the morning when his dad is praying, because his mom tells him to be, but this time he ambled straight over and put a hand on his dad's hands which were clasped in prayer. and said, "Hi, special one. Hi, special one. Hi, special one."

Never once had he called anyone that before. Now, he said it to his dad 6 times, "special one." Until his dad finally got it—God was answering his prayer and giving him a blessing for the day.

That's what Christmas is all about... In the midst of the struggles of life, hold on tight... because God is whispering in your ear: "Hi, special one!" Christ, the Savior is born. Emmanuel, God with us. "Hi, special one!"