

**Matthew 1:18-23**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

**Proverbs 16:31**

Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.

**“The Threshold Singers of Whidbey Island”****Rev. David Dalke****December 18, 2011**

The name of the community is Coopville. Coopville. It's located outside of Seattle on Whidbey Island. Coopville, Washington. It's a place where six of us couples gathered earlier this year. We've been meeting every two years since 1962 and it's interesting how the conversation changes every time we get together. Now we're talking about -- we talked about being parents, then we talked about being grandparents, then we talked about health, that sort of occupies us, but it's in Coopville, this year. And so on the third day, some of the couples decided they'd go to a little neighboring village and have some pie and coffee and Cheryl and I chose to stay behind, and just kind of walked the streets of Coopville. Not very many streets, three or four. Cute little shops. So we finished that quite quickly and went up into the neighborhood. And as we got into the neighborhood, we came across a church. Frame church, high steeple, it was called the Methodist Church. Not the United Methodist Church. The Methodist Church of Coopville, Washington, on Whidbey Island. And as I saw that church, I remembered reading something in the paper that morning, the weekly paper, and it was an advertisement, and it said that the Threshold Choir of the Coopville United Methodist Church would be meeting tonight at 7:00. And then it said, "We are a group of women that gather to sing gentle songs at the bedsides of people who are struggling to live and struggling to die, who are struggling to make sense out of life." The Threshold Singers of Whidbey Island.

I thought about that word, threshold. I know there are lots of definitions, but the one I keep thinking about is when you threshold something, you hand onto it. You threshold it, you take a grip on it for the moment. You don't know about tomorrow or the next day, but today we threshold the experience. We do our best to understand it, to get through it, but we just threshold it. I'm thinking of three stories where I believe those women that sing those gentle songs, where I think they might have been present. And the first one, first story has to do with the world series this year. My goodness, the St. Louis Cardinals and the Texas Rangers. I just thought that was a great series, and when I was a kid I just

loved the St. Louis Cardinals, couldn't get enough of them. In seventh grade I sent off to the team for all their autographs, Stan Musial and Red Schoendienst, Enos Slaughter, all those players, the picture of all the St. Louis Cardinals. I told my parents "When I grow up, I'm going to be a sports announcer, and I'm going to travel with the St. Louis Cardinals, and I'm going to live in a hotel so I don't have to make my bed."

So I was rooting, yet there was a part of me, as I sat there with my grandkids, my daughter and her husband, watching that first game, there was a part of me that was reaching out to the Texas Rangers. Because some weeks before, some of you might recall, a little six-year-old boy and his daddy went to a game in Arlington, Texas. They were seated in the front row on the outfield, kind of high up, and in between innings the players would take their shots at throwing the ball to each other, warming up, and finally the daddy of this little six-year-old boy shouted out on the field, "Throw us the ball. Throw is the ball." And one of the outfielders threw the ball and lofted it up, but it didn't quite make it to the stands. The daddy reached over to catch it, and he tumbled out of there and fell to his death down below, to the cries of the little boy shouting "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy." I'm sure at that very moment, and the moments to follow, I'm sure that those angels from Whidbey Island were there. I'm sure they were there to comfort and sing their gentle songs.

Story number 2 - Early in November, our music department over here at Colorado State University hosted the National Collegiate Choir organization. They had a conference and it was for people from all over the United States, choir directors, in universities and colleges. They came, choirs came, they were chosen by CDs that they'd sent in, to sing. So there were concerts every night, as well as clinics through the day. So I went the first night. By the way, our own choir from Colorado State was wonderful. They hosted and they sang beautifully. But the first night when I was there, I heard the first choir. There were three choirs that night. They sang a half hour each. The choir was from British Columbia. They did a beautiful job. And then the second choir was the college of Charleston, South Carolina. They had kind of a southern flavor to their music. And the third choir that sang, they were from Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. Capital University in Columbus Ohio.

They handed out their program, and I sat there, and as they started to sing, I looked at the cover of their program, and I recognized on the cover there was a stage, there was the stage, the picture of their choir on the stage. And I thought, "I sang on that stage. I remember, yeah. When I was a Singing Quakers at University, we toured and we went for a big concert of the year. This was it. The concert of the year, because our choir director was an alum from Capital University and he said, "We're going to go back home to my college and we're going to sing our last concert there on tour, and it will be the biggest one we've done all year." And I remember as I'm listening to them sing, I'm reminiscing, looking at that program and remembering standing on that stage. But I remember as we approached Columbus that time, the snow had started to fall. And it fell, and it fell, and it fell, and pretty soon we found out that it was the largest snowstorm in many many years of Columbus. It immobilized the city, practically. Our bus barely made it up to the university. We changed our clothes on the bus, put on our tuxedos and our

gown and got out and we stomped in the snow, went up into the auditorium, took our place on that stage. And I remember the curtain opened, and there was one and there was another, couple people over there, four over there. There might have been 15 people there that night. The big concert of the year. But we sang our hearts out. We sang our hearts out for those that showed up, and for our director. His school. And so I'm reminiscing that, I'm sitting there while I'm over here at the university and I'm listening, to Capital University sing, and I'm reminiscing, and then all of a sudden, they come to their last number. And I look on the program, and the last number is called "I Will Rise." I will rise. And there's a footnote on the program. And what it says is this: "The song you're going to hear, "I Will Rise," is not usually sung in a repertoire of a university choral department because it is created by a Christian songwriter, and the lyrics are of a Christian nature. Therefore, we have chosen to sing it. And the reason we're going to sing it is because of an experience that happened at our school," the footnote said. "We sing this song at every concert" because they had had a professor in their music department who had a sister-in-law and a nephew who were brutally murdered in the Columbus, Ohio area, and when she came to them, to the choir, she said, "I just need you to be there, the angels, the people from Whidbey Island, just be there for me." And they said, "What can we do?" And she said, "You can sing "I Will Rise" at the funeral services. Sing "I Will Rise"" "There's a peace I long to know, there's an anchor for my soul. I will rise." And I'm sure the singers, the Threshold Singers of Whidbey Island were there for her, in the voices of those choir members.

Story number three takes place in Nazareth and also in Bethlehem. Did you ever look at the picture of Mary and Joseph and Jesus? See the picture of them in the manger? It almost looks like a still life picture, looks so peaceful, like a portrait. But you know what? It hasn't always been peaceful. Let's flash back. Flash back to Nazareth, and here comes Joseph. He's coming home from work. The sun has set, the stars are coming out, and he's walking the dusty roads. He's going to stop at the well to get a drink of water before he goes on over to knock on Mary's door to see how she is doing, because Mary is probably living with her family, and he wants to go see her, so he stops by the well, and he leans against it and is drinking his water, and as he does so, he hears people in Nazareth talking, and they're gossiping, and they're pointing fingers. I imagine he tosses the water and he goes on over to her house. He knocks on the door, he says, "Mary, come with me, we need to take a walk." And they go out under the stars and they're walking on the dusty old roads and he looks at her and he says, "Mary, the most precious name I know, the most precious name I know, has just been tossed around on the slimy gossiping lips of people in this community. And some are saying you are going to have a baby. Mary, is that true?"

Can you imagine the discussion that must have followed? Mary talking about how an angel, singing a gentle song to her, how an angel came and said, "You will bear a child, and his name will be Jesus. Yes, and he's going to be someone that's going to impact the world, people's lives." Can you imagine that discussion? And then, I think but I don't know, I think Joseph must have said to her, "Have you told your Mom and Dad?" We don't know much about Jesus' grandparents. Joseph was older. We don't know anything about his mom. We only know his dad's name was Jacob. But we know a lot about

Mary's parents. Their names were Ann and Joachim, and the Catholic church has liked them and cared for them and appreciated them so much, they granted them sainthood. Saint Ann and Saint Joachim. And I suspect that they probably understood as best they could what Mary was going through, their daughter. Because you see, years ago, Ann and Joachim wanted to have a child, and they could not conceive, and so they prayed and prayed and fasted and fasted, and all of a sudden, she became pregnant, and an angel appeared to both of them and said, "You will have a daughter, and she will also be a very special, special person." And Mary was born. Mary was born. I think they understood what it would be like to walk the community, because years ago, when they couldn't have children, people pointed at them, "Must be evil spirits, must be something wrong with them, or they would be able to conceive." Because that's how people thought.

You know, someone has said if nobody knows the trouble you've seen, you're not living in a small town. And Nazareth was a small town. And they talked. So I think they understood. And isn't it interesting that they could have sent her away. Ann and Joachim could have taken their daughter and said, "We want you to go up into the Judean hills, deliver your baby, come back. You don't have to stay here and be disgraced." But they didn't do that. I know a family that did that. I know a family that just did that. Yes. They had a 16-year-old girl, and she was pregnant and not married, and they sent her away when her little belly started to show a child they sent her off to relatives. And they made up stories to their little community about why she wasn't there, and why she wasn't in school. And after she delivered that baby and had it placed for adoption, then she came back and they made up more stories about her. I know that's true, because the little baby that she had placed for adoption is our son. And we've talked with that birth mom, many many times, talked about what that was like for her.

But Ann and Joachim didn't do that. They stayed by Mary, and I think they walked the dusty road with her. I think they stood behind that donkey and the rest of those folks, and they walked that long road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. I know they were there for her. Grandparents do that. Most grandparents do that. That's why Chuck and Kathy aren't here. They're at the manger of their second grandson. And I think they walked. I think they might have knocked on some of the doors. "Is there a place for us to stay?" I think they were there when the baby was born. I know they were. Cradling that baby, helping Mary, you know. I don't know what it's like to give birth. We men don't have the slightest idea, and let's not get into that one. All I know is, you women know what that's about, if you've borne children, you know, and I'm sure that mom was there. And I'm sure Joachim was. I'm sure they were even keeping some people away. "She needs to sleep, she needs to rest." We were there. We were there for Elizabeth when she was born. Goodness sake, when they came home from the hospital, her mom and dad were tired and we told them, we said, "Hey, why don't you just take a night off and let us, Cheryl and I will watch the baby Elizabeth," and we took her, and they left, and she cried. She cried and she cried, and cried and cried and cried. I was to preach the next day, and I was trying to keep my head on what am I going to say and how am I going to say it, and she cried so loud and I said, "Cheryl, there's nothing we can do to just give her to me" and I put her in my arms and I kind of did this, I said "I'm just going to practice" and I started preaching out loud, and she went right to sleep.

And that is the truth. You know, some things we say up here are the truth, and some things we say we hope and ought to be the truth. And that one is the truth. Well, my friends, this is the week of Christmas. It's a busy time for a lot of people. It's also busy inside of our hearts and our souls, because many of you have suffered some losses. You've suffered losses with family, maybe jobs, maybe relationships have been hurting. You've struggled. You have struggled to live and make sense out of life. But I suspect, just as those Threshold Singers of Whidbey Island were present for that little 6-year-old boy in Texas, and present for that family in Columbus, Ohio, at Capital University, that those angels are also singing to us. They are singing their words in gentle words of comfort. I suspect that's happening, and I also know that they were very present at the manger. They were very present at the manger as they surrounded it. Joseph, Mary and the little baby, and the set of grandparents, and maybe some others. And as they all sang, as we heard them sing, "O come, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." And now may the God of peace, may the God of preparation, may the God of harmony, the God of hope, the God who has created us for this moment to celebrate, and may Jesus the Christ who was an infant and who grew and who still lives amongst us, who lives amongst us, and may the Spirit of comfort, may the Spirit of the Threshold Singers of Whidbey Island be with you this week and the weeks to come. Amen.