From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:

Let’s begin with Matthew telling us that the angel came to Joseph in a dream. First, a word about angels. The Greek word ΑNGELΟΣ means messenger. We often think of angels as winged creatures, but the Bible typically portrays them as looking simply like people. The writer of Hebrews wrote to first century Christians: “Don’t neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.” In the book of Daniel, Daniel speaks to the angel Gabriel and refers to him as “the man,” and in Luke when Mary speaks to Gabriel, again he appears simply as a stranger, no wings.

I’ve never seen an angel, or at least I didn’t know if it if I did. I once ran out of gas on a terribly cold and snowy day, ten miles from the nearest gas station. A guy stopped to help, taking me to a gas station, and then back to my car. His name was Jeff—sometimes when I think of angels I think of Jeff. Most often the angels God sends today have names like yours. These angels come to offer encouragement, or guidance, or a bit of tangible help. Sometimes, like Joseph’s angel, they help me know God’s will and find the courage to do it. I wonder if you’ve ever met one of these angels? Or if you’ve been one of these angels?

Today is the third weekend of Advent. This weekend is traditionally referred to as Joy Sunday—the candle on the Advent wreath is pink. The emphasis is on joy. But the season leading up to Christmas is often anything but joyful. It’s not the chaos of preparation for Christmas. It is the fact that in our minds we have an idealized picture of Christmas and our real life experience is anything but joyful. In fact, depending upon what’s happening in our lives Christmas can be really depressing. But here’s one of the keys to finding joy in Christmas. It’s found in being the angel for someone else—in offering encouragement, kindness, help, and blessings to the other.

- How is your Christmas shaping up? Do you expect it to be “Norman Rockwell” perfect? If not, what factors, big or little, may play a part in making your Christmas “imperfect”? In what ways can you, your family and your group be an “angel” for others, finding more joy in your Christmas by increasing theirs?
From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:

In our story, Mary sees Gabriel, the angel, in broad daylight with her own eyes. But Joseph has a dream during his restless sleep that night. In that dream he sees a messenger of God who speaks to him saying, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid.”

When God calls you to do something and the opening words are, “Don’t be afraid,” you should be afraid! Whatever follows is sure to be filled with challenge and risk.

Why does the angel tell him not to be afraid? It wasn’t that he might be afraid of the angel—he just looked like a guy. The word was, “Don’t be afraid of this mission to take Mary as your wife, and to raise this child as your own.” The idea of doing so must have made this humble carpenter anxious or afraid. Don’t be afraid, Joseph!

“Don’t be afraid” is one of the most often recorded statements of God or Jesus in the Bible. We’re going to spend the entire month of January talking about it in a sermon series called, “Unafraid: Facing Life with Courage and Hope.” The fact that God so frequently has to tell us to not be afraid reminds us that the things God calls us to do are sometimes frightening.

God calls us to take the difficult path sometimes. He calls us to do things that, at first, make us uncomfortable or afraid. Earlier this fall we studied the life of Moses. God called him to return to Egypt to demand that Pharaoh release the Israelite slaves. Do you remember how the 80-year-old Moses began making excuses, and when God responded to each, Moses finally blurted out, “Lord, please send someone else!”

I wonder if you’ve ever felt God calling you to do something outside of your comfort zone, or that scared you just a little bit? If not, you’ve not been paying attention….

On this Joy Sunday, let me remind you that almost all of the most exciting, life-giving, and joy-filled experiences you’ll ever have come because you took a risk, a leap of faith. You stepped outside your comfort zone and said yes to God’s “don’t be afraid” call.

God was calling Joseph to raise a child that was not his. As he did the messenger of God said what God says over a hundred times in Scripture: “Don’t be afraid.”

• The pastor said, “When God calls you to do something and the opening words are, “Don’t be afraid,” you should be afraid! Whatever follows is sure to be filled with challenge and risk.” When (if ever) have you sensed a call from God that brought challenge and risk with it? How did you respond?

• If Joseph had been your friend, and had told you that he was going to proceed with his marriage because of what an angel told him in a dream, how do you think you would have responded? Is it possible for God to communicate with you today through a dream? If so, how could you tell if it was God, or just the cold medicine or pizza you ingested before bed time? In what other ways can God communicate with you? Are you “listening” for all (or any) of them?

From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:

This leads me to this task Joseph has been given. The messenger of God has told him that the child Mary is carrying is to be very important indeed. And Joseph was assuming responsibility for this child. Some call Joseph an adoptive father, because for all intents and purposes he did adopt and raise Jesus as his own. Some see him as a step-father—Jesus’ father by marriage.
The mission the angel of the Lord gave Joseph was to raise this boy as though he were his own. It was to love him, to mentor him, to teach him, to guide him. It was to model for this child what it means to be a man. The child was not his by birth, but the boy would need him to love him as his own.

There are step parents and adoptive parents that see this role as a mission, that know going into it it will be hard work, who take on a call that is frightening. No wonder the angel said, “Don’t be afraid”.

We’ve described Joseph as the patron saint of doubters, but today I’d say he is also the patron saint of step parents and adoptive parents. I think it is amazing that at the center of a God’s saving story for humanity, is a step-parent or an adoptive parent. Perhaps nowhere is that selfless, sacrificial love of God more clearly displayed than when someone takes on the task of raising, caring and loving a child that they did not have to care for—where there was a choice to be made and the individual set aside their fear and accepted the calling to be a step or adoptive parent.

I think Joseph models for us something important. We’re all called by God to care for and help raise children that are not our own. James writes these well-known words in his epistle: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.”

Here at Resurrection we have a ministry called A Child’s Hope that focuses on foster and adoptive ministry. A Child’s Hope is focused on raising up, training and supporting volunteers who open their homes to foster children, and supporting those who are contemplating adoption. I believe some of you have been called by God to care for these children who are in need of homes (there are 900 in Kansas alone).

One way that we care for and help children that are not our own is our Christmas Eve offering. 100% of the offering on Christmas Eve goes to support projects benefitting children in poverty in Kansas City and around the world. Each year we invite our members to give an amount equal to what they will spend on their own family’s gifts that year to benefit children who are not their own. We have hundreds of families who do this each year. Last year in one night you gave $1.2 million for low income children.

When Christmas comes with a mission to be angels to those aging out of foster care that they might have a future, or helping rebuild schools, clinics and homes for families and children who lost everything in a hurricane, it begins to be something deeper significance, and have deeper joy. One of my friends, Mike Slaughter, reminds his congregation, “Christmas is not your birthday.” Maybe we need to teach that to our kids, and ourselves, once more.

- Have you ever chosen, either temporarily or permanently, to play a parenting role for a child who was not your own? If so, what led to you taking on that role? How did you feel about the experience and the results? Do you know others who have raised, or helped to raise, children who were not their own?
- When Jesus, in Luke 2:49, called the Temple “my father’s house” (clearly not referring to Joseph), how do you believe Joseph felt? Was he offended? Awed? Puzzled? Hurt? Or is it possible that he humbly nodded in agreement?