

**1** I've been pondering the times in my life when I've anticipated joy that was unrealized, envisioned but not yet seen, hoped for but still out of reach. It's a more common experience than you might think. My first year of college was at the University of Minnesota. I was so excited to be independent, sharing a dorm room with my best friend and getting as far away from high school as possible! I imagined a steady, four-year progression toward my goal of becoming a chemical engineer like my dad. It didn't take long for me to begin to doubt that vision.

Doing what dad does isn't always the most helpful way to discern one's calling in life. Calculus and physics, it turns out, are difficult and require disciplined reading and study and practice. As a young man with no practice at independent living, little discipline, and a relatively low emotional intelligence, I stumbled through the first quarter, and dropped out of school midway through the second quarter. My pride would prefer that I blame my part-time job at the grocery store, but the truth is I just wasn't ready for college or, more basically, to be living on my own. It was difficult to adjust and regroup, but after a year of living in a small studio apartment in Minneapolis and working at the grocery store, I revised my vision and tried again with more success, this time at Augsburg College, a smaller school where I didn't feel so lost. Sometimes we're disappointed because the dreams we dream aren't right for us, often because we fail to seek God's vision for our future. I have to admit that's a lesson I continue to learn, and probably will for the remainder of my life.

**2** But even when we do seek God's best for future, we often find disappointment in the present. Time and time again, God's people have been called to look past our present disappointment and forward to see a joyful future, not with our eyes, but through the eyes of faith. In a way, the wisemen travelling in search of Jesus faced that same dilemma. They apparently had heard something of the prophecy foretelling the birth of Jesus, and they saw his star in the sky, but that's pretty thin evidence on which to base a cross-country journey that likely took many long months of hard travel as well as significant danger and expense. Let's hear their story as recounted in Matthew's Gospel, in the first nine verses of the second chapter. **{Read Matthew 2:1-9, NLT}**

**3** The Boundary Waters Canoe Area has always been one of my favorite places to stare at the night sky. Why is it that stars like this take our breath away? Is it because we're not used to seeing them? When the sun is up, we don't see them. When there are too many lights on in the neighborhood, we don't see them. When it's cloudy we don't see them, and when it's not cloudy, it's either the cold air or the mosquitos that drive us indoors. When we do see a star-filled sky, it's something special.

But what if seeing those stars was meant to be more than simply beautiful? What if those stars were put there to get our attention and invite us to worship the one who made them? What if one of those stars told a story, fulfilled a promise, and invited you to be a part of something bigger than yourself? What if one of those stars was a sign that we could see, pointing us past our present difficulties to a more joyful future? That's the way it was for the wisemen. Who knows what signs of God's loving presence and plan we might find if we started looking for them? It seems to me that when God asks us to journey through hopeless valleys, God is often generous in giving us clues to his faithfulness and love to sustain us.

**4** Marriage is another great example of a future envisioned yet not fully realized. A little more than a year ago, Jana and I travelled to the Catskill Mountains in New York state for the wedding of my son, Wes, and his bride, Becca. There were already many visible signs of joy in their life together before the wedding, but every marriage is a hopeful investment in a future that is largely unseen. I tell most couples that marriage is like two people carrying boxes of car parts into a garage. One has Volvo parts and the other Dodge. Their life together requires they build something unique that's never existed in the same exact way before, without a You-Tube video that shows them how to do it. That requires commitment, imagination, perseverance, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and above all, love.

Every marriage is a hopeful journey into an unknown future, searching for a kind joy that's hard to even imagine from the vantage point of where we stand today. Jana and I often laugh at the unforeseen pathways we've taken to arrive where we stand today. Not every one of them has been enjoyable or easy, but we're grateful for every one of them, because we're grateful for the life we have together, today. And along the way, God has provided stars, signs in the people and circumstances of our lives that have given us hope for a joyful future.

**5** If marriage is a hopeful risk, then how much more so is starting a family? Whether you become adoptive parents, biological parents, or something in-between, like Mary and Joseph, every parent has hopes and dreams for their family and their children. Sometimes we make so much out of Mary and Joseph's difficulties with their unexpected pregnancy that we forget to remember what must have also been an unprecedented time of hopeful imagining about what life was to become for them and their child. Neither of them could have dreamed their first-born child would be addressed as King, Lord, or Savior. And even after hearing the words of the angel, how could they ever know that Jesus would be a king completely unlike any other who had been born before? Perhaps thankfully, neither could they imagine that he would come to lay down his life so that we might have abundant life.

The brutal truth is that life can be hard, and to be a parent necessarily opens us up to the risk of disappointment and pain, not just because our children, like us, make bad choices, but also because our children, like us, follow different dreams than the dreams we dreamed for them. And as much as we want to protect them, our children are vulnerable to the tragedies of life, equal opportunity visitors for which we simply can never be fully prepared. Thankfully, that doesn't mean we simply give up on raising families. To live is to dare to take risks. Somehow, parents find a way through the disappointments of parenthood and cling to a hope that is greater. Where does that come from? How can that happen?

**6** I can't to speak for you if you're a parent or someone else who's struggling to find joy that's hoped for but not yet seen. That's your story to tell. But let me note two things that Mary and Joseph did that seemed to help them walk through the valleys of doubt.

Mary and Joseph stuck together, with each other and with family, finding strength and encouragement there, as well as signs of God's goodness. It would have been easy for Joseph to break off the engagement. In fact, it would have been expected. Seeing this through with Mary was a radical risk-taking decision. And Mary and Joseph stuck with family. As we'll read next week, within days of learning of her pregnancy, Mary found great joy in sharing her experience with her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant at the time, also with surprising circumstances accompanying her pregnancy, and also with a visit from

the angel Gabriel. As we learned last week, we can find joy in our relatives, even the most unlikely members in our family cast of characters.

And crucially, Mary and Joseph listened to and believed the Word of God. Both received an explanation of Mary's pregnancy from the angel Gabriel, and both accepted and acted on his explanation, as well as the promise of what God's plan was in bringing this baby into the world in such an unusual way.

You could say that angelic visions don't seem to be as common today, but I think they never really were very common. Thankfully, we have other ways of hearing God's Word. The Bible is surely one of the most basic signs pointing to a joyful future. Ironically, at a time when so many of us have almost unlimited access to Bibles and Bible study tools in print and online, we're reading the Bible less and less. We can't easily point to the stories of God's faithfulness, and the promises of God's mercy, when we aren't rehearsing them through the reading of the Holy Scriptures, planting the Word of God in our hearts.

**7** Where are you on your journey through life today? Are you burdened by the disappointment of joy that's unrealized, envisioned but not yet seen, hoped for but still out of reach? Are you having trouble letting go of a dream that isn't going to come true, or resisting a new dream that you know is more consistent with God's vision for you? We all need joy to sustain us, just like we need oxygen to breath. The present moment is all we really have with any certainty, so somehow we need to learn to appropriate the joy of a more hopeful future for today, even if we can't see how we'll possibly get there. Mary and Joseph showed us one way to do that, but it's up to each of us to wrestle with God in working out our own faithful path in life.

This we know with absolute certainty. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was, is, and will always be good news of great joy for all people, and that includes you, no matter how impossible your past, present, and future seem to be. Keep your eyes on the manger, for because of Bethlehem, we know the depth of God's love for us, and the dogged determination that God has to walk alongside us through every circumstance of life. That was true 2,000 years ago, and it's still true today.



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