

“Silent Joe” / Matthew 1:18-25 / 18 December 2016

Hi...I'm...Joe. “Silent Joe,” some call me. Cause...well...I don't talk much. Oh, you know how it is. Or do you? Maybe not. After I got hitched, well, Mary did enough talking for both of us. She started by finishing my sentences for me. Little while later, she started starting my sentences for me. Then, it wasn't long till she was filling in the middle parts. I was never a big talker though. I'm more of a...a dreamer than a talker. Not a single word I ever uttered made it into the gospels. But three of my dreams did! Yeah, I'm a dreamer, just like that other Joseph of old. His problem was, he talked about his dreams of got himself sold into slavery for it. Me? I don't talk much. But it's the last Sunday in Advent, 2016, and if Advent is meant to do anything, it's to prepare folks for what's to come. And a part of me deeply fears that we haven't yet done that here. No, we're not ready for what's to come, are we? We don't know what lies ahead, but there will be tragedy and loss. There will be acts of barbarity and greed. And there will be deeds of resistance and grace. And somehow most of us will live to see another day. And even from my vantage point outside human history, I do not know what tomorrow will bring. Me? I don't talk much. But I think today it's time at last for me to speak. I'll tell you what the angel told me in that dream so long ago: “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.” Like me, you will be called upon to take risks. Like me, you will be asked to do things that seem nearly impossible. The world is rapidly changing. And like me, someday, you will have to lift your voice at last and speak out! Only do not be afraid. All the powers of darkness cannot extinguish the light that is coming into the world, the light that is in you.

You know the story of Val Weisler, a fourteen year old girl in suburban New York who was being bullied? She was a quiet girl with no friends, a little awkward, a little ungainly. Her parents had just separated, both of them too caught up in their own worries to notice hers. Val collapsed into herself and stopped talking. Each day she arrived at her locker to find notes from a band of mean-spirited girls who always taunted her. “You're mute,” one note read. “Just leave.” “Why are you even here?” More than once she got notes telling her to do the world a favor and die—commit suicide. They followed her around and mocked everything she did. Val bore it all without protest...until one day she saw a boy she didn't know getting bullied by other boys. He was a loner, too. At last she found her voice. She sidled up to him and said, “Hi. I'm Val. I'm in the same boat as you. You matter. Let's get through this together, okay?” The boy admitted that he was seriously researching the fastest, least painful methods to end his lonely torment. But the boy said, “You gave me hope. You validated me.” Val went home that day feeling a little bit better about life. She Googled the word “validate” and liked what she read. Then, she Googled “how to make a website,” and within six hours of her conversation with the bullied boy, she had created a website called “The Validation Project.” At first, it was just a place for bullied kids to tell their tales. In time, it became a community of bullied kids banding together for support and a sense of cyber-community. Soon enough, teens from all the world over were writing in to share their pain and find compassion from strangers. It wasn't just about bullying anymore. Foster kids who would never be adopted; anorexics; kids struggling with anxiety or depression: anyone at all could come to the Validation Project to be validated. Before long, the website turned into a non-profit with an adolescent girl as its CEO. 6,000 kids in 105 countries make up the Validation Project—which tries to match troubled teens with mentors. Val has done some TED Talks and worked with the White House and the State Department.

Now, of course, the Validation Project has an all-teenager board of directors who have to schedule their meetings around things like soccer practice and band camp. But how powerful it is when a silent soul finally speaks, when a friendless, bullied girl finally finds her voice, and she latches onto a single word, the word “validate,” and from it she creates a living community of support for other kids! But here’s my question: What snapped in her? What made her speak and act out at last? Her own solitary struggle left her silent. But she found the courage to speak out when she witnessed her own pain in the eyes of another! Then at last she found her voice! Then at last she found something that outweighed her own fear; it was the urgency of helping someone who suffered like her. We’re always afraid until we see that we’re not alone in our troubles. And then sometimes the solidarity of the suffering can give us just enough courage to speak, enough courage to act, to be not afraid.

It’s just that when Mary turned up pregnant before the wedding, I was scared. I was hurt. I had a choice to make. I could have claimed my rights under the Law of Moses and had her stoned. Well, maybe some people could do such a thing; I never could. I only had two other options: I could call off the engagement quietly and never speak of it. That was my plan. But there was a third way, and this is what the angel suggested in my dream. I could marry her anyway. I could run the risk of marrying a disgraced woman, and people would assume that I was a party to her disgrace. For the rest of my life, people would whisper about me, judge me, call me a degenerate. But then the dream and the angel’s soothing words, “Do not be afraid.” Then the scared look in my fiancée’s eyes, which mirrored my own fear. She was just a kid, a kid in big trouble. And I knew what I had to do. I had to stand with her. We had to bear this shame together. Oh, friend, whoever you are, whatever you face, whatever direction your world is headed, there comes a time when you must make a stand, find your voice, take a risk for what’s right. Do not be afraid. There comes a day when you gotta speak up and speak out, or I promise you, you will forever regret it.

Well, the timing of this service is out of whack because of all the Christmas carols you’ve got to sing. I should probably stop talking myself. But I want to leave you with this thought: I’m Joseph, Silent Joe. I was an obscure, scared, illiterate carpenter with no power whatsoever in this world. Like me, you will be scared, and like me you will be called upon to take risks for what’s right. Like me, you will be asked to do things that seem nearly impossible. I want you to see the pain and the fear in the eyes of another. See yourself there. The world is rapidly changing. And like me, someday, you will have to lift your voice at last and speak out! Only do not be afraid. All the powers of darkness cannot extinguish the light that is coming into the world, the light that is in you. Amen.