



“Family Planning”

a sermon by

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As we mentioned last week, throughout the course of the Advent season we will be exploring the cast of characters behind the Christmas cards and nativity scenes- the holy family, wise men, shepherds and angels that gather around the manger in celebration of the Christ child. Last week we looked at Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, and this week we will look at his nuclear family- Mary and Joseph- and I guess you can count the Holy Spirit too. Our reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 1:18-25.

“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 fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

If these Advent passages are going to be real for us, we've got to get real with them. So, let's transpose this one into a form that might help us to understand the scene that Matthew paints here. Imagine that a 14-year-old girl walks in to a planned parenthood clinic with her boyfriend. They are clearly not married and she is clearly very pregnant. They sit down together in the waiting room and on the table before them are spread an array of brochures filled with public service announcements. He takes her hand. A few voyeuristic glances from another, more established couple waiting across the way catch their attention but certainly not their gaze- no eyes to be met on that side of the room. This young, poor, unmarried couple offends the other couple- what, are they supposed to be made to feel guilty for playing by the rules? No matter, the other couple shrugs off their self-consciousness because of their pity- this awkward pair will never make it. What a shame. It's a surprise she hasn't 'taken care' of this issue already, but good for her for going through with it and good for him for being there at all. Now, take this snapshot and stick it on the front of a greeting card, and you've got Advent. Christ is coming- but he has to grow inside Mary first. That's the part we usually forget to really take in. You'll notice that in Matthew's version we move from conception to cradle in just seven verses but in reality it was nine months long that sweet Mary and righteous Joseph walked around under the raised eyebrows of nosy neighbors.

Matthew does not give Mary a voice for a lot of reasons here, but in the gospel of Luke you will recall she herself is visited by an angel, who gives her the heads up that her body and her life are about to change drastically not for the worst, but certainly for the more uncomfortable. Mary is troubled and afraid, but filled with wonder, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” she says, and sings a song of praise. But you better believe that people would soon begin to talk. And besides this, the evidence of this miracle started to show before Joseph received his vision from the angel. Joseph, however, did not abide by the law which stated that an engagement was a legal agreement which, when breached by adultery, was to be annulled by the stoning to death of the accused at worst. Joseph, Matthew says, was a righteous man, unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, and so he planned to dismiss her quietly. An interesting choice for one who was raised to abide by the letter of the law- the law whose

obedience was at the time the only means of right relationship between people and God. A righteous choice indeed to swallow his own pride and abide instead by the spirit of the law that recalled God's word that he desires mercy and not sacrifice despite the fact that one would bring disgrace while the other justice.

Professor Phillip Yancey writes, "Today as I read the accounts of Jesus' birth I tremble to think of the fate of the world resting on the responses of two rural teenagers. How many times did Mary review the angel's words as she felt the Son of God kicking against the walls of her uterus? How many times did Joseph second-guess his own encounter with an angel- *just a dream?*- as he endured the hot shame of living among villagers who could plainly see the changing shape of his fiancée?...Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal- it seems that God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being he played by the rules, harsh rules: small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity."¹ These are the beginnings of the life of our Savior. The introduction of the Word made flesh into the world. Scandalous.

Yes, rather than a blur of joyful sentiments and baby showers, I would imagine that nine months of pregnancy for Mary and Joseph were pretty rough. Just because the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream does not mean he appeared to everyone else. So in the eyes of this small town Jewish community Joseph makes an interesting choice indeed by staying with a woman who is carrying someone else's baby. And Mary carried the soul-crushing stigma of pregnancy out of wedlock in a community that valued strict adherence to the proper ordering of such events and staked its relationship with God upon it. But these were the faithful acts of the very first people to accept Jesus on his own terms. Jesus was not yet even born and he was already redefining the way we are to look for him in the world and respond to the calling placed on all of us by his own life. Thrusting the first believers, Mary and Joseph, into the first of centuries of tensions between reconciling God's law with the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ.² It is through these humble parents who would perhaps appear more at home on posters for family planning rather than on the covers of greeting cards, that God chose to enter the world and speak to us a quiet word about what it is that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

It means that it is fleshy. Real. Raw. It means Immanuel- God with us- in all those ways that bring us comfort that Jesus understands our suffering and in all those ways that disturb our every sensibility. Because it also means God with all of us and not just with those who appear to wear the ornaments of special blessing for there are none to be seen. And it means that God is not just in the law- but in the mixed up ways of the world because Christ was not about power and majesty or propriety and gentility or even decency and good order. He was about people and he was about love. Christ did not have good boundaries with the needy or preserve social distinctions by watching who he associated with. He chose to come into this world as an underdog and didn't mind inconveniencing others or causing a stir if it meant it was going to spread the gospel. God with us- whether we like it or not- Immanuel staring us in the face

¹Phillip Yancey. *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 31.

²Leander Keck, ed., *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, p. 135.

through the eyes of a pregnant teenager longing for the miraculous secret within her to be understood. Jesus, calling us to make a choice between the letter and the spirit of the law when we are presented with the opportunity to stand boldly beside another person in their shame or disgrace them in public. God with us- wondering if we will only look for him in the avenues sanctioned by the traditions of our church and norms of our culture or if our tender eyes can handle his new vision. Immanuel, the Word made flesh if we would now only stop to listen and reach out and touch and accept that with immaculate conception also comes awkward silences and painful, bloody labor. Jesus, Son of God, right in the middle of all that raises eyebrows and suspicions, inviting us not just to sit at the table but to kneel in the manger and find him right in the thick of the ordinary stuff of life. Whether we like it or not. Because whether we like it or not, that is exactly where he found us. Amen.