



"Advent"

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for this final Wednesday of Advent comes to us from the gospel of Matthew chapter 1 beginning in verse 18.

“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, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him 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.”

“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.” Now that’s an introduction to a story! One that sounds much more like a story that would be told in hushed tones over the punchbowl at the office holiday party than one that would be proclaimed from the pulpit in any church but there you have it. Matthew raises the curtain on the Advent scene and it is safe to say that there is most certainly drama. The first words about our savior is that he’s a child of questionable paternity.

A friend of mine is preaching on this text this Sunday and the title of her sermon is, ‘What child is THIS?!’ But it could also very easily be ‘whose child is this?’ because you’ve got to believe that was the first question on Joseph’s mind. And this text is about Jesus and Mary, but it’s really about Joseph too, isn’t it?

This poor guy. Doesn’t make it to the cover of hardly any Christmas cards. Like the dad who gets lost in the shuffle of the baby showers, he’s relegated, for the most part, to the sidelines of the Advent season, but his role is so critical, and so real. And I think it helps make this season a little more real for us as well. “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.” That’s a critical little editorial comment that Matthew tacks on to the end there. But it is only for our benefit. Joseph has no clue. In fact, the scripture says that he had already planned to dismiss Mary quietly. More specifically, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, had planned to dismiss her quietly.

At least in the gospel of Luke the writer sets the stage by having the news of the pregnancy given first to Mary and from the mouth of an angel. But in Matthew- you know, in Matthew it’s all just very real. Mary and Joseph figure out they’re pregnant in approximately the same way that any other young couple in their junior or senior year of high school would figure it out. Only without the benefit of context. For Joseph, there was no tracing this conception back to anything other than a giant question mark about his fiancée.

Back in that day to be engaged was as binding, legally, as marriage. Financial transactions had been made. Plans had been set. And this covenant could be broken by one of two things- infidelity or death. And, for the woman at least, infidelity may quite well lead to public mortification and then death- by stoning, actually. Casting Mary off, cutting her loose from their binding covenant in a public display- dragging the courts into it so that her sin could be made plain for all to see and he could get his money back was the only thing that was going to get Joseph out of this with any semblance of dignity or pride- it was the only way for him to save face in the community- this small town community. But he was a righteous man. And a righteous man wouldn't do that.

So he had been confronted with Mary's...condition, weighed the options, and being righteous made the truly incredible decision to dismiss her quietly and just deal with the hot shame and whispers that would undoubtedly accompany him down main street for years to come. And then the angel of the Lord comes in a dream.

Don't you look at this story and find God's timing utterly exhausting? Here Joseph is just trying to do the right thing, he'd made up his mind that this was the choice to be made, had finally come to some certainty about the direction of his newly- redirected life and then comes the angel. In a dream. "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."

Do not be afraid, the angel says. -- The only thing perhaps more remarkable than the fact that the angel reaches out to Joseph in a dream is the fact that Joseph responds. Perhaps his sense of the predictability of his own life had been so thoroughly dismantled at this point that it didn't seem like such a big deal but I don't think that's it. I think he responded because he was righteous. Which is to say, he sought to be pleasing and faithful to God. He took Mary as his wife and she delivered a son. And they named him Jesus.

Joseph's decision sure wasn't practical. It wasn't even decent. It made things, I think it is safe to assume, a lot more difficult for him. It didn't make sense to anyone else in the community. And we can be sure there was suffering. He sacrifices his dignity, his pride, his own certainty about what his life was supposed to look like and in the name of what? Faith. Maybe hope. Certainly love. And new life. A baby named Jesus who came from God was coming. To save the people from their sins.

You know, we've been talking a lot about Advent hope these last few weeks. That expectant, pregnant period of waiting for the coming of Christ. But this text is a sobering reminder that God's intersection with the world- the coming of Christ into our lives- God truly with us- can be joyfully anticipated but also profoundly uncomfortable because it is oh so very, very real. It can be awkward. Dangerous. It upsets our plans. People talk. We don't usually get prior notice about what God is initiating for the greater good. Or how he is at work in some of the most challenging circumstances of our lives. We hear prophesy but don't know where it applies. We long for comfort but are called instead to risk. And there is suffering.

If this story is proof of anything it is that God's timing is absolutely not our own. That Advent- preparing for the coming of Christ- means to surrender our expectation and certainty about how life is to unfold. It is about discerning what righteousness is

supposed to look like at any given moment and digging deep to respond in faith and in hope and in love when the angel comes in with the plan. Or the doctor calls. Or your loved one has something to tell you. Or your asked to step into the office. Or the phone rings. It means to surrender our notions of what God is going to look like, Of what your life with God is going to look like. Of when and how he is breaking into this world with power.

These are all realities that Joseph got to know intimately as he awaited for his wife to give birth to his newly adopted son.

In Advent we are invited into what one scholar calls, a gracious uncertainty. That is, we are invited to live a life that is ruled not by the certainty of common sense, but the gracious uncertainty of a life ruled by the Spirit. It means that as a people of faith, it is not that we are uncertain of God, it's just that we are uncertain of what He is going to do next. Advent promises and Joseph would testify to the fact that it is gloriously and sometimes frightfully uncertain as to what God is going to do next. It is uncertain how he will come in to this world and into your life. But God will come. With a far greater plan than we could ever have in mind, God will come and he comes to save. So we can wait on the Lord in peace.

These very young, very afraid teenagers thrown into the deep waters of life were not the only ones who could have chosen an easier way around the very personal part they were asked to play in the story of the salvation of humankind. Joseph's wasn't the only decision that wasn't practical. Wasn't even decent and that made things a lot more difficult for himself. God did not have to set his holy feet on this soil. The creator of the universe did not have to take on flesh and suffer. Did not have to sacrifice dignity, pride, the world's expectation about what he was to look like. Did not have to know us. Did not have to die for us.

But had already determined to do so quietly. In the form of a servant. In the form of a child. In the name of faith and hope and love and new life for all. A baby named Jesus who came from God arrived. To save the people from their sins. Amen.