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Matthew 1:18-25

In Advent, the lectionary readings, which is to say the Scripture readings assigned to us on any given Sunday, hand out their usual dose of the Second Coming of Jesus on the 1st Sunday of Advent and John the Baptist on the 2nd and 3rd Sundays of Advent. And every year I wonder, “what does this have to do with me? Or you?” Now, I realize that theologically speaking, reflecting on the Second Coming is meant to help us prepare for the 1st one, or reflecting on John the Baptist’s proclamation of “Prepare the way of the Lord” is meant to help us well, prepare the way of the Lord. But still, some years I find the readings lacking; and while the lectionary is helpful and serves its purpose – it’s also a “one size fits all” approach – and sometimes one-size-fits-all doesn’t fit.

It was with this mindset that I thought, “Well, what do we need to hear?” And after much reflection, I decided what we needed to hear this year in the year of our Lord 2024, was something about how these people who were there for the first Christmas managed to not only survive but thrive and grow in their faith. You see, the time in which Jesus was born was a time of upheaval and uncertainty, a time of government decrees that no one wanted, and a time in which people were afraid. Their lives were terribly disrupted by shattered norms and traditions tossed aside. The nativity story is the story of the ultimate sacred disruption, of people who were neither true saints nor blatant sinners (that we know of) but just as regular as can be. Like us! And as they were going about their usual business – like us! – a miracle dropped from the sky, and even though they had not been prepped for it, they accepted it and yielded to it – for the most part (we’ll get to Herod next week). And I think that just might have something to teach us.

Hence this sermon series “Walk in the Light”, in which we’re reflecting through the stories of Mary (which you heard last week), Joseph (today’s story), and Herod just how we can (or cannot) prepare our own hearts for the coming of Christ. So sit back, settle in, it’s Advent, and listen for the Word of God as it comes to you today.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[a] because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[a] (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Holy God,

As we turn to Your Word, may Your Spirit guide us to hear the courage in Joseph’s story and the power of Emmanuel—God with us. Illuminate our minds and strengthen our faith, that we may walk in obedience and trust, just as Joseph did. Speak to us now, Lord, for we are listening. Amen.

“Walk in the Light: Joseph Who Yielded”

Poor Joseph. If he isn’t forgotten he’s relegated to the back of the nativity with nothing to do. Like so many veterans of the now obsolete father’s hospital waiting room, Joseph takes a backseat role in the Christmas story. Joseph’s story reminds me of an episode of *Mad Men*, the award-winning TV show set in the 1960s. In one episode, Peter’s wife goes into labor while he’s at work. When he arrives at the hospital his instinct is to run into the labor and delivery room to be with his wife. But Peter’s father-in-law stops him and reminds him that his place is in the waiting room. Of course, Peter says. So, he waits in the room with the rest of the fathers-to-be. (If I remember correctly, I think he even goes back to work, the labor is so long. I can’t even imagine!) My Dad, who was of that generation, never quite understood why fathers became a part of labor and delivery and wondered out loud, on more than one occasion, just what in the world they did during them!

Every time I hear Joseph’s story I think about the narrator in John Irving’s novel [A Prayer for Owen Meany](#), who recalled his own starring role as Joseph in the church Christmas pageant by quipping: “I, Joseph, had nothing to say, nothing to learn, and nothing to do.”

But as Matthew tells the story, Joseph did do something. He yielded to God. He surrendered his fears and doubts and yielded to God's guidance and opened his heart to the miracle unfolding around him. And I think that is remarkable, especially when we consider everything that was happening at the time. Mary and Joseph lived in an oppressive society. They were heavily taxed by local and faraway rulers who demanded as much as 50% to 60% of what they grew and owned. Richard Horsley, author of "Liberation of Christmas," says Caesar was so tax-hungry that if someone couldn't pay, the Romans would force the peasants to go back home and farm the land again--even though they left because they couldn't make it. Horsley suspects that Joseph, cast in the Bible as a carpenter or woodworker, was actually a "downwardly mobile" peasant who had lost his land.

And let's not forget that when Jesus was born, Herod the Great was king and ruled Judea, Samaria, and Galilee as a police state. Plus, while 10% of the population was born into nobility and lived lavishly, the remaining 90% worked the fields around Nazareth, growing grapes, olives, and grain. In Bethlehem, where it was drier, sheep and goats were raised. The people were subsistence farmers, raising one bag of food for themselves and one for Herod or Caesar.

And 70 years later, when Matthew wrote his Gospel, things weren't much better. The Second Temple -- God's home on earth (!) -- had been destroyed, and the city was overwhelmed by Romans. Thousands of Matthew's readers' friends and relatives had been brutally killed, hundreds of them by crucifixion on purposefully sadistic Roman crosses. The world and the future did not look good for Jews, nor the small but growing Jesus movement.

This is the world in which Matthew wrote and Jesus was born.

But wait! There's more!

It was a man's world, and as you've no doubt heard before, Joseph had every right under the law to publicly shame Mary for her pregnancy out of wedlock. He could have cast Mary in the worst possible light and left her homeless or brought shame to her family if they were to welcome her back into their home. But Joseph aimed for a different response, a quiet divorce, Matthew tells us in verse 19, thus saving Mary from public disgrace. This choice would have taken courage since Joseph's own reputation was at stake in a culture where honor and shame have great significance.

In light of all of this, I think it's helpful for us to think about the ways that the faithful thing to do and the faithful way to be are sometimes at odds with social convention. Joseph didn't violate convention to be politically rebellious or even to know his own goodness. He

violated convention and remained faithful to Mary because God, as God often does, intervened in an unexpected way. God sent an angel to appear to Joseph in a dream. The angel basically said, “I know this is not what you expected, Joseph. But, it’s going to be OK. God is about to do something wonderful, despite the fact that according to law and custom you are in a most unfortunate predicament.”

Friends, this is the message this story brings. That unexpected things, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work . . . but we will never know that if we’re not willing and able to yield to God’s unexpected interventions in our perfectly planned lives. And don’t for a moment think that Joseph had it easier than you; that it was somehow easier back then to go along with angel’s commands! Joseph had a lot to yield! Saying yes to the angel meant saying “no” to laws and institutions and traditions and norms that had served him well and that he loved and cherished. It could not have been easy for Joseph to yield to the angel, to say “yes” to all God was asking him to do; not to mention how devastated he must have been to learn his fiancée was pregnant with someone else’s child, even if that someone was the Holy Spirit! But thankfully Joseph woke up from that dream and said, “OK, I yield.” Can you imagine how different the story of Jesus’ birth might have gone if Joseph had been a man more bound by tradition and norms than he was to God?

(Friends,) we all know that sometimes things don’t go according to plan. Right? Life throws us a curveball and instead of going left, we must go right. At these times, both literally and metaphorically, we slow down, look around, consider our surroundings, and take it all in *before we proceed*. Or not. Sometimes we must come to a full stop if something is barreling down at us, or traffic is coming from all directions. Other times, the way is clear, and we can proceed quickly.

But no matter what, we pause before we decide how to proceed. This is what yield signs do. They force us to slow down and look in all directions, before proceeding.

The angel slowed down Joseph; he was ready to divorce Mary quietly and move on with his life without her. Which again, would have been fully expected and accepted. But it wasn’t what God wanted him to do. If Joseph had declined the angel’s invitation, he would have missed his chance to be part of the miracle. But when the angel spoke, Joseph somehow found the faith to overcome his fear. He leaned into the forward motion of the Spirit and took his place in all the amazing things that God had planned. He leaned forward, despite his anxiety and misgivings; despite his tradition; despite his fears.

What’s the Bible’s most repeated? ***Fear not***

May I suggest that as long as we are bound by fear, we cannot live fully into God's call on our lives. Or God's creative vision for the world. May I suggest that when we are bound by fear we do a lot of sitting still, looking back, and wishing that things were easier, less messy, and more like the good old days.

In the years since the pandemic, the world we've inherited bears little resemblance to the world we were prepared for. Things that seemed certain for past generations now seem tenuous; the literal ground we stand on is unsteady beneath our feet. Many of the institutions we built life around either failed our communities or are struggling to regain their footing post pandemic. The economic impact continues to ripple, young people don't know how they'll ever be able to afford a home, young women are choosing where to live based on where they can access the healthcare they may need in an emergency, and people in Gaza are dying of thirst and hunger.

Am I the only one who occasionally looks around and wonders if God has decided we aren't worth the trouble after all? If this whole "baby in a manger thing" has been cancelled? Year after year I preach Advent, sometimes right after horrible, tragic events like the shooting of innocent 1st graders and their teacher in Newtown, CT. Like, if we can't fix things after that when will we ever fix things? Are we all just standing around watching an empty sky?

But just when I'm ready to throw in the towel, I find the grit, and the courage, and the faith to yield long enough to remember that no army is going to show up to fix it all. Instead, a baby – a baby of all things – is the one who is coming. And **this** is the good news. That the baby everyone was waiting for meant God was doing a new thing that humans had never dared to dream of before. And much like Joseph, we have a game-day decision to make: do we reach backward and cling to traditions, and norms and institutions, even when they no longer serve us or meet the needs of the moment? Or do we hear the timeless words of the angel – **fear not** – and put all our faith into the world that is still becoming? The new thing that God, even now, might be working in our midst?

Can we stop, pause, yield long enough to consider the places where God is trying to do something new in your life, or my life, or lives together? This week, consider the times in your life when God has called you to do something strange and unexpected, and you just went. As the poet David Whyte notes, for most of us "the call will not come so grandly, so biblically, but intimately, in the face of the one you know you have to love."

Those are the small steps God calls us to. As Joseph yielded to the angel's command, he had no idea how it would all turn out. He just knew that something wonderful had been promised, and that he had been beckoned to follow. So too may we rise and follow God's call, yielding to God's way, not knowing where the journey will take us, or the path that God

has set before us, but going anyways. Knowing that God can be trusted because, as the Bible likes to remind us, “Fear not.”

Emmanuel. God is with us.

Amen.

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