

Langhorne Presbyterian Church
Langhorne Pennsylvania
December 11, 2011

“Beginnings: According to Matthew”

Matthew 1:18-25

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¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

*²³"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

(which means, God with us). ²⁴When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

This Advent season we are listening as the best story tellers in the whole world each tell the same Jesus story from their own perspective. Last week we heard Mark tell us that it began with a voice calling from out of the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord.” From the wilderness, the harsh and difficult land where people died and danger lurked. The voice telling us to prepare the way for the Lord even in the desert places of our lives.

Next week we will hear as John places the beginning of the Jesus story before the dawn of time and on Christmas Eve Luke’s story will begin first with a menopausal woman and then a virgin getting pregnant. Today we will listen to Matthew as he tells the story from the perspective of the man who was planning on marrying that pregnant virgin.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the same greatest story ever told, but each tells it in his own way. Each gospel is filled with stories of this wonderful rabbi who loves like no one has ever loved. Some stories are the same in each of the gospels and some are told by only one of the story tellers. Each ends the same, however, with a crucified Jesus risen from the dead and Lord. And each story begins very differently. Before the dawn of time, with a voice calling from the desert, with shocking news announced to a virgin and with confusing orders given to a very confused man.

Who of us does not know what it is like to be confused by the confusing ways of God?

Mary and Joseph were betrothed, something less than married, but a whole lot more than engaged. Betrothal meant that all the terms of the marriage had been settled and the rights of the future husband and wife clearly spelled out. A betrothal could be broken only by

divorce, and unfaithfulness during betrothal was considered adultery. A wedding date was set at the time of betrothal.

Between betrothal and the wedding, the groom would prepare a house, or more likely a room in his father's house, for his married life. The bride's dowry would be collected and both bride and groom prepared for marriage. A betrothal might last as long as a year and bride and groom were to lead separate lives, though in small villages they were sure to see each other from time to time.

During the time of her betrothal, Mary was found to be with child, an unusual, but not unheard of turn of events. Were Joseph to be the father of the child, Mary and Joseph and their families would be embarrassed, but the child considered a legal heir in all respects. Mary was found to be with child "from the Holy Spirit," Matthew tells us. But Joseph did not know it.

He did not know, but Matthew tells us two things about Joseph – he was just and he was compassionate. The word translated in just in the English Standard Version is righteous, faithful to the law or good in other translations. Faithful to the law is not a precise translation, but one that gets at what is behind the word. Mary had been unfaithful. The law required punishment. In fact, it prescribed stoning to death, though there is little evidence that the penalty was often paid. But Joseph was also a compassionate man, "unwilling to put her to shame."

It is very unlikely that Mary faced the possibility of being stoned to death for her apparent adultery. It is very likely that she would have borne life-long shame, derision and exclusion. And should Joseph want to, he could make the whole affair very public and very painful for Mary (and salvage his own reputation as he did so). Instead he decided to divorce her quietly. Of course the village would know. Of course the baby would be born. Of course Mary might not ever find another husband. But it was the best she could do. Maybe she could leave and stay, live with, her cousin Elizabeth in the Judean hill country near Jerusalem.

We live in a world where sometimes the best we can do seems not much good at all. I am no moral relativist, but you and I live in a world where we are confronted too often with the kind of decision Joseph had to make. What's right against what's kind. Hurt at a betrayal that demands some sort of accountability and yet called to a forgiveness that is more than a cheap "I'm sorry" followed by a meaningless, "It's okay."

This sense of the tension between what is right and what is kind is very real and not always easily resolved. Our elders struggled with this in our Statement of Faith. In the "therefore" section we say that we will:

- *Care for all people without regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, economic or social status, beliefs or (lack thereof), sexual orientation, political preference(s), or the expectation of repayment.*

End of sentence. Period. Care for others is not, shall not be, conditioned upon anything other than our common humanity.

We also know that we must not compromise Christ's high calling to those who follow him and the Word's gracious standards for all who would live a full and good life. We said we will:

- *Honor chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage which is Biblically defined as between one man and one woman.*

This is desperately hard work. To care for all without regard and to aspire to the still more excellent way of God's love. Joseph models life in a difficult world.

We Presbyterians aren't much into statues, but were we, I'd want as many statues of Joseph as there are of Mary. Even if this is all he did. He made the tough decision to balance justice and compassion. Pray that we would be so wise.

But that is not all Joseph did. As he come to his decision for a quiet divorce, still wrestling with, think through, pondering about, reflecting on, he falls into fitful sleep. In a dream, an angel, a messenger from God, appears to him. We don't need to know the details. We need to hear the message.

"Joseph, son of David." The angel begins by reminding Joseph who he is. Not just Joseph the son of Jacob as we have learned in the genealogy in the first half of Matthew 1, but Joseph, son of David. Joseph may have been just a carpenter but he was of royal stock. You and I may be just a fill in the blank. Just a teacher, just a mechanic, just a doctor, just a technician, just a salesperson, just an unemployed person who's tired of looking for work. But you are also of royal stock. Made in the image of God, male and female he made them. Fearfully and wonderfully made, we are. Never forget who you are.

"Do not fear." Angels always tell us not to fear. We live in a fearful world. Joseph lives in a world where the fear of shame and the fear of the consequences of not doing right are real. Just because we have banned shame from the public square and refuse to believe there are consequences to any behavior, does not mean that our world is not every bit as fearful as the world of Joseph. We just aren't as honest about it. We need to be reassured. Every day we need to be reassured. "Fear not," God's messengers always say to us.

"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." We have to hear the whole sentence. Emmanuel. God with us.

Joseph is going to fear to take Mary as his wife if she has been cheating on him. The child is not his. The woman has brought shame on his family and hers. Villagers will gossip and God's Law demands justice. But amazingly, says the angel, neither you nor any other man has had sex with Mary. The baby was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our small modern minds have trouble with the biology of the virginal conception. Instead of debating the mechanics of reproduction we ought to allow ourselves to be blown away by the drama of salvation.

God with us. The very creator of the universe, the one who made us in his image, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; David's Lord; the one who put songs of praise in the mouths of Miriam and Hannah and courage into the hearts of Ruth and Esther: this God has come to be with us as one of us, yet able to save us all.

"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him."

Our world is so like Joseph's world, a world of betrayal and hurt where good decisions are hard to come by and fear abounds. Like Joseph, we need to remember who we are; not just me, but a child of the King. And we must be ready for God's message to come; startling good news that we may miss if we're more fixed on the mechanics than the wonder of what he is doing. And this is the good news. Love has made his home with us. Love is with and will never leave us. Love is for us. Love has a name and his name is Jesus.