

Emmanuel

Matthew 1:18-25

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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Christmas is only three days away and we approach it with excitement because we look back and seem to remember only the good times of our youth. I just spent three days in South Carolina with Leroy and his brothers talking about the "good old days" of their childhood. They are not unlike most in American culture and media that both load Christmas with false expectations of family harmony and good cheer. These images and expectations allow Hallmark and the shopping mall catalog to define the "perfect Christmas." In the weeks before Christmas, many of us who worship invest a great deal of time and energy trying to achieve that picture-perfect Christmas. Others of us feel emptiness or sadness that our lives and families prevent us from having the sort of Christmas we believe we should have or that we remember.

In today's story of Mary and Joseph, God's work often upsets comfortable social expectations and conventions. The first Christmas was not produced by a flawless lead-up and elaborate preparations dictated by convention. Certainly, most people would not expect the incarnation to happen through the life of the young virgin girl, Mary. Many of us forget just what a scandal the incarnation and the virgin birth really were, that behind the pretty nativity scene lies both a wonder and a scandal.

Think about your own experience—the ways in which you and I, your family and my family have failed to live up to the notion of the "perfect Christmas" and the ways that, despite that failure, we ended up finding ourselves more graced and more faithful than we might have otherwise been.

Today's text reminds us that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far from "proper." Joseph, whom the text calls a righteous man, discovers that his soon-to-be-wife is pregnant. The narrator knows that it is a child of the Holy Spirit, but such things are unheard of at this point to the characters in the story. To Joseph, the pregnancy is a violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman. He decides to divorce Mary, the more humane of his customary legal options. Perhaps out of kindness, or regret, he will do this quietly in order not to shame her, and he realizes that things are not going to go as planned or as convention would have it. Mary has simply violated the important moral rule that she should not be pregnant when they were married.

We are all like Joseph at times, are we not? We go about our business and do not want to make trouble; we just handle things quietly and without a fuss. Perhaps this text reminds us that things we want to do loudly should be done quietly.

In light of this story it is helpful to think about the ways that the faithful thing to do and the faithful way to be are sometimes at odds with social convention. Some may say we should not give Christmas gifts to children whose family member is in prison. That prisoner should have thought about his or her family before committing the crime! But mercy requires a different response. The faithful response is a difficult truth to learn. Joseph did not 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 is going to be OK. God is about to do something wonderful, despite the fact that according to Jewish custom and law you are in a rather socially unacceptable situation."

That is the message part of this text brings—that unexpected things, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work. Amid all our less-than-picture-perfect Christmases, the Christmas trees that are not quite as perfect as we want them to be, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something new.

Somehow Joseph has to trust this strange news: that this child is from the Holy Spirit; that he already has a name, Jesus; and that he will save people

from their sins. We need to think about what it means to be saved from sins by an infant who lies in a manger. Often, we think too theologically about salvation, getting caught up in later debates about exactly how Jesus makes the forgiveness of sins possible and what it means to be saved by faith. All that comes later.

What begins here—what God announces—is a human being who will somehow show us a different way to be. Think about the ways someone has saved you—through love or intervention—from doing something you regretted doing. Maybe it was a word of wisdom or encouragement just when you needed it! Maybe it was an action, that stopped you from going down the wrong path. How many times has the wisdom or love of another shaped our action? Try to think about salvation in a different way—in humility, instead of in the arrogance that comes with pronouncements in some traditions that one is "saved" while others are not.

The news catches Joseph off guard. At this point in the story, he is totally unaware of the journey that will take the one he will call Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the temple to the cross to the empty tomb. If Joseph were told all of that, the news might overwhelm him even more than the news he has received. So many times God opens a door for us, or gives us a vision, beckoning us to trust and follow.

As you think of such times in your own life, think about the times in your own 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 Mary and Joseph journeyed to the first Christmas, they did not know where God would take them; all they knew was that something wonderful had been promised and that they had been beckoned to follow. So too the text calls us to rise and follow God's call, not knowing where the journey will take us, or the path that God has set before us. **Aaron Klink**

We only know God promised to send Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us."

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