

The Birth of Christ

Matthew 1:18-25

It is Christmas time – many of us have been shopping and wrapping presents; cleaning the house and getting out the family recipes planning for the big day. Some of us spend more than we can afford on things that will be broken or unappreciated or re-gifted. We do this because American culture and media both load Christmas with false expectations of family gatherings, gift-giving, family harmony and good cheer. These images and expectations allow Hallmark and the shopping mall catalog to define the "perfect Christmas." In this week before Christmas, many of us worshipping this morning invest a great deal of time and energy trying to achieve that picture-perfect Christmas. But to tell the truth, 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. Our reality is that there is sickness, frailness, mental illness, additions, infidelity and fear in our families and in our lives. Our family portraits look very different from what we would like to present to the world.

But don't feel that you are the only one. In today's story of Mary and Joseph, God's work upset the 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.

So, take a moment to think about our own experiences—the ways in which you have failed to live up to the notion of the "perfect Christmas" and the ways that, despite that failure, you and I ended up finding ourselves more graced and more faithful than we might have otherwise been. Today's scripture reminds us that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far from "proper."

Joseph, whom the scripture called a righteous man, discovered that his soon-to-be-wife was pregnant. The writer of Matthew knew that this would be a child of the Holy Spirit, but such things were unheard of for those who were living that experience. To Joseph, the pregnancy was a violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman. He decided to divorce Mary, the more humane of his customary legal options. Perhaps out of kindness, or regret, he would do it quietly in order not to shame her, and he realized that things were not going to go as planned or as convention would have it. Mary had 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 scripture reminds us that things we want to do loudly should be done quietly. In light of this story we can think about the ways that the faithful thing to do and the faithful way to be are sometimes at odds with social convention. This is a difficult truth for us 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 had to trust the strange news: that the child was from the Holy Spirit; that he already had a name, Jesus; and that he would save people from their sins. You and I need to think about what it means to be saved from sins by that infant who was laying in that manger. Often we think too theologically about salvation, getting caught up in debates about exactly how Jesus makes the forgiveness of sins possible. All that comes in later sermons.

What began there—what God announced - was a human being who would somehow show us a different way to be. Think about the ways someone has saved you—through love or intervention – stopped you from going someplace that would have gotten you into trouble or stopped you from saying something that you would have regretted later. How many times has the wisdom or love of another shaped our action? We need to 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 caught Joseph off guard. He was totally unaware of the journey that would take the one he would call Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from a carpenter to an itinerant preacher, from the temple to the cross to the empty tomb. If Joseph had been told all of that, the news might have overwhelmed him even more than the news he had received. So many times God opens a door for us, or gives us a vision, beckoning us to trust and follow.

Think of such times in your own life when God has called you to do something strange and unexpected, and you just went and did it; like thinking about someone and calling them, or helping a neighbor or a stranger, or giving the words of encouragement to someone who needs hope. 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 scripture 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**

As words from O Little Town of Bethlehem say:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.

This Christmas, allow Christ to be born in you anew – trust him and follow him!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A,
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