

Joseph, Our Lord's Adoptive Father

Sermon adapted by the Rev. DWHinkle

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Scripture: 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. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But 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. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ 22All this took place to fulfil 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.’ 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

Matthew and his wife Jaimie have wanted to have a child for many years, but could not. They're in their thirties and time's running out, so they decided to adopt. The baby was about to be born and Matthew and Jaimie were on their way to Florida where they'll pick the child up and bring it home to Atlanta, Georgia. They don't know if it'll be a boy or a girl. We're asked to pray that all will go well.

Two days later a picture of the newborn was emailed to family and friends. The baby appears to be African-American. If true, Matthew and Jamie, who are white, are about to discover the depth of racism in America, and my immediate emotional reaction forced me to see that it's in me, too. This beautiful gift-of-God child didn't come in the form expected. I was surprised, taken off guard, and forced to confess my sin. God's mercy took the form of the revelation of my world shrunk- too- small. We'll have to expand our world in a place we hadn't even realized it was caved-in. I thank God that I'm forgiven for my distorted view and given a chance to expand it, for it's only through forgiveness that I can accept myself and expand.

We're ready now for Matthew's incredible story of another baby who came in a way and a form that utterly scandalized the world, and still does. *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.*” For some reason Matthew's very particular in describing how Jesus came into the world. There's something he

wants us to see clearly. *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.*” Ooo...that seems like too much information! Why do we need to know this? Mary and Joseph never slept together before Jesus was born? T.M.I. Already Matthew’s confronted us with scandal. This is Christmas! We don’t need scandal! Yet Matthew’s telling us that Jesus was born to a very young, unwed mother and we don’t know who the father is. All we know is that Joseph wasn’t the father, and, so, who is? There’s plenty of fodder for rumor and gossip surrounding the birth of this child. This child’s not pure by any standard we know. And you expect us to believe that God was somehow the father? Right! Jesus will live his entire life under the cloud of scandal. Will we, too, be scandalized? Further on in Matthew’s gospel Jesus said, *Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*” (Matt. 11:6)

Even before this morning’s story of Jesus’ birth, Matthew’s sown seeds of scandal in his accounting of Jesus’ genealogy, that long and boring list of begats and begemes that begins Matthew’s gospel. He names 42 fathers from Abraham to Jesus, all Jewish, and four mothers in addition to Mary. These four mothers: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (the beautiful and scandalous wife of Uriah) all have some sexual impropriety about them or the conceptions of their sons, and all of them have non-Jewish backgrounds. There’s more going on here than we’d thought. Matthew’s subtly telling us that God works in mysterious ways through irregular, and even scandalous, channels. Later we’ll see that scandal even includes the cross and resurrection.

God constantly breaks into our world and forces us to expand it to include those we thought didn’t belong. God’s purpose is to include all people, men and women. Matthew knows this, and therefore includes these four gentile women in Jesus’ genealogy.

Our story continues. *Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*” When Joseph first found out about the pregnancy, he didn’t believe the child was fathered by the Holy Spirit. Why would he? He was a righteous man, the text says, and believed being pregnant before marriage was wrong. From his point of view, this couldn’t be from God. Mary’d broken the rules and must suffer the consequences. But how far should he go? How should he respond? He could be harsh with her. There was warrant for that in his religion, lots of bits in the Bible are quit mean. According to the Bible, she should be stoned to death for what she did. But his religion also had a strand that encouraged mercy and forgiveness. While he couldn’t go the whole way with that gentler part and forgive her and raise this child as his own, he would move in that direction. He’d quietly divorce her and refrain from dragging her through shame and humiliation and perhaps even death.

No sooner had he made this decision than *an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.*” What is it about Joseph and dreams? Had his gentleness toward Mary been modeled on the Joseph of old who’d forgiven his brothers? Would the story have unfolded differently if Joseph had chosen to be harsh? Would it have unfolded at all?

The angel tells him, *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.*” This thing that’s happening is of God. Don’t be afraid. I know it cuts across all your previous beliefs and experience. I know it violates your sense of right and wrong. I know your neighbors aren’t going to understand, but,.. this is of God. God’s opening up the world in a new way and it must begin with you. Receive this child. Accept him as your own. Raise him in love and empower him to be all he can be. This is part of a plan much bigger than you, Joseph.

The angel continues, *Mary will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” As the scriptures say, *Look, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.*” You’re going to be part of this. You’ll be integral to the story of how all humanity finds a way out of its dilemma. Jesus has to be born into human flesh for this to work. If you don’t let the “how” of Jesus’ birth scandalize you and put you off, you’ll be blessed beyond your imagining.

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.” Joseph, in obedience to the angel’s message, is **not** scandalized by the seemingly scandalous way in which Jesus comes to planet earth and the human species.

Trusting the angel’s message, Joseph embraces Mary and the child she’s carrying. By embracing them, he embraces gentleness, mercy, reconciliation, peace and the whole of creation. No one is excluded in his embrace. Mary may be Theotokos, the Mother of God, but Joseph is a good example to us all as well. He embraced “*God is with us*” and became the adoptive-father to our Lord.

Amen?!

Resources:

NRSV Bible

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