

“God Is with Us”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 23, 2018

4th Sunday of Advent

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Matthew 1:18-25

“The birth of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, took place this way.” Sometimes we forget that ‘Christ’ was not Jesus’ last name – it was a title that designated him as God’s anointed one; the Messiah long promised in Jewish prophecy. But, because of the way the birth of Jesus did take place, the way that Matthew’s gospel tells us this story, Jesus’ actual last name would have been a mystery. For, we know that his father, Joseph, was not really his father; not, at least, according to the way we expect a birth story to unfold.

What we may imagine is that Jesus would come from a more ‘typical’ family, like that elusive ‘perfect’ family we so often see in Christmas ads: everyone is smiling and getting along, no one looks tired or stressed, everything is beautifully wrapped, all of the cookies are expertly decorated and the Martha Stewart-quality table is already set. Sometimes we are tempted to think that our own families ought to be a little more ‘typical’ or ‘perfect.’ But if God really wanted us to believe in and emulate this ideal, we probably wouldn’t be reading a story like this.

For the account we have before us this morning shows us God entering into imperfect lives, that are just like ours, to become flesh and dwell among us as Emmanuel: God with us.

Unlike in Luke’s gospel, where mother Mary is the central character of the birth story, Matthew chooses to focus on Joseph, who was engaged to Mary. In that time, engagement was not a romantic declaration of intent. Rather, it was a binding, legal contract. To be engaged – or, as other translations alternately call it: betrothed, espoused, or pledged – essentially meant being married without it having yet been consummated; and before moving in together. If, as happened here, Mary became pregnant while engaged but not married, it could have only meant one thing; the child belonged to someone other than her husband-to-be.

In Joseph’s day, there were only two realistic possibilities when faced with the possibility – or what must have seemed to Joseph as the unquestionable truth –

of Mary's infidelity. Either he could make it public issue, in which case Mary would have been stoned; or, he could divorce her – the translation “dismiss” softens the reality as “engagement” did earlier – and do it quietly; and as a righteous man, he chooses the latter option.¹

Of course, this is not the way the story ends. Instead, God intervenes in the form of an angel who calls Joseph – the father who knows that he is not really the father – to adopt this special child and, instead of quietly walking away from Mary, to tie himself to her and to this complicated, messy story of God's salvation for the world. Matthew tells us that Joseph answered ‘yes’ to this call; and in this birth story, we learn a few other things about Joseph as well.

First, we learn that Joseph loved both God and Mary. While he did not want to violate God's law, the rules of his religious heritage, he also did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. Despite the mystery of her pregnancy, and the lack of any logical explanation that would exonerate her, something prevents Joseph from acting out of anger and revenge; and maybe that something was that his love for her.

Another thing that we learn about Joseph is that he is scared. When the angel appears, Joseph is told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Was he fearful that if she already been unfaithful, it might happen again? Or, was he afraid of the social pressure that may have weighed on him; to either ‘dismiss’ Mary or forever be known by those in his community as the one who took on an unfaithful bride? We are not told exactly why Joseph was afraid, but any of these reasons would have made going forward with the marriage a fearful thing.

And so, what we learn next about Joseph is also important: that Joseph was obedient. When he woke up from his dream, he “did what the angel had commanded” by taking Mary into his home as his wife. None of us can know, but I'm sure we can imagine, the inner conversation he must have had, but in the face of all those consequences that might have followed – socially, religiously, emotionally – we know what choice he made: he obeyed God's messenger.²

And so, the Joseph that we encounter in today's story is a mixture of confusion and faith, fear and obedience – much like all of us. When we read Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, it helps us to believe that God would care about

¹ David Lose, “God Really With Us”

² John Dobbs, “Joseph's Jesus Story”

people like us; and despite the sometimes messy situations in which we find ourselves, can use us for great purposes.

It makes me wonder who, if it were to happen today, might have been Joseph's angel. For if we believe that he was a person like us – someone who experienced in equal parts confusion, faith and fear – and that we, like Joseph, can be called to greater purposes clouded in mystery, then someone has to do that calling. Maybe today, Joseph's angel could have been a waitress at this favorite diner, who was willing to listen to his predicament and challenge him for not being more trusting of his fiancée. Or maybe today, his angel would have been a neighbor who was willing to sit with him while he cried over the apparent loss of that 'perfect' image of what his story was going to be: engagement, marriage, a new home, maybe a dog, and *then* a baby.³

Sometimes Emmanuel, God with us, means that we are called to be God for one another; messengers of God's mystery, wonder and grace; to be the listening ears and reassuring voices who trust that God can make a way, even when there seems to be no way; and that God does not expect that our stories need to be 'typical' or 'perfect.'

It also makes us wonder how open we, ourselves, are to be more like Joseph after the angel's visit; able to let go of what society might think, or what our own expectations might have been, and to act faithfully, according to the calling we are given. Are we able to let go of the illusion that the stories of everyone around us are closer to being 'perfect' than ours? Can we share honestly the broken aspects of our lives so that others can journey with us through it?

Matthew's story of Jesus' birth tells us that God chose the 'perfect' family for him – not because they were 'typical' and certainly not because there was never confusion, fear or doubt. They were not perfect because their home was spotless, not because they had lots of presents under the tree, not because they wore stylish matching outfits in their Christmas cards. They did not possess any particular social or economic clout. There really wasn't anything that, by earthly standards, would have recommended this family to a divine adoption agency.

But here is what they did have: Joseph and Mary both said 'yes' to the angel of God who called them into this mysteriously wonderful family journey. They were both willing to humble themselves, and to expose themselves and each other

³ Marci Glass, "The Imperfect Perfect"

to potential doubt, questions, ridicule and scorn, in order to do their part to help save the world.

God works through real people who face real challenges. Many of us who sit here today are facing our own particular fears and doubts, heartaches and bumps in the road. Sometimes, at this time of the year, it can feel unacceptable to admit the ways that we are struggling or hurting; and we wonder if acknowledging our pain somehow makes us less faithful. But, as we see today's story, God didn't choose a fairy-tale princess to give birth to the Messiah, but rather an unwed, peasant girl. And he didn't provide a father who was rich or successful, who passed on his genes for looks and smarts; but instead someone who was loving and obedient; a man who had his own doubts and fears but wanted to do the right thing and received angelic guidance to help him accomplish it.

And perhaps that is the promise at the heart of this passage – that just as God came to be with us through the birth of Jesus the Christ to Mary and Joseph, so also God comes to us as Jesus the Christ to be with us now; to be our Emmanuel, to use us for good, accepting us for who we are, and as we are. Yes, God is really with us; and yes, God loves who we are, loves us as we are; and by God's very presence among us we are blessed; blessed to be a blessing for others.

As we continue to wait, now just another day or two, for Christmas to finally come, let us remember that God has indeed already come; and promises to remain with us, always. Amen.