

Year A Advent 4 God With Us Matthew 1 vv18 to 25

It seems odd that the week *before* Christmas, we are hearing a story about the birth of Jesus. But perhaps you noticed that in this Gospel story of the birth – unlike the more popularized version found in Luke – in this story the focus is not on Mary, the young woman who gets pregnant and gives birth, and it's not even on Jesus, the long-awaited Saviour of the whole world. Matthew's focus today is on Joseph. Why is that?

What we don't hear today is that Matthew introduces this story with the long account of Jesus' family tree, beginning with Abraham and ending with Joseph the husband of Mary. Of course, halfway through the list, Matthew calls our attention to David, the king of all Israel and Judah, because the Messiah is to be of the line of David. Matthew divides the very long list of names into groups of 14 – a multiple of seven, the number of perfection – in order to make clear to us that Jesus is the Messiah, the one through whom God will bring to us the kingdom of God. Jesus' birth for Matthew, is the first step in moving from the old broken age into the new perfect age and God's hand is highly visible in the unfolding of the story. This *is* a part of God's plan for the ultimate salvation of all things.

Amazingly, God's plans hinge, though, on the human reaction, on the human response to those plans. Moving forward through the old broken age into the new perfect age depends, today, on Joseph.

In the famous children's classic, *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, the White Queen gives Alice some very difficult advice. The Queen tells Alice that, each morning before breakfast, Alice must practice believing six impossible things. Joseph has discovered that Mary, his legally bound soon to be wife, is pregnant he presumes, with another man's child. He would be expected –

pressured by laws and societal norms – to get rid of her. He is a righteous man, Matthew tells us, and he was not willing to publicly shame his young wife by putting her on trial or by dragging her name through the mud in order to save his own reputation. If he did, Mary would either end up dead or cast out by society. Joseph decided that he would divorce her quietly without casting blame and that's when an angel of the Lord started whispering impossible things in his ear. Joseph's father's name is Jacob but, when the angel speaks to him, the angel addresses Joseph as "son of David" – making an obvious connection to the family line of the expected Messiah and then the angel lets loose: "It's okay to marry this already pregnant woman," the angel tells him. "Ignore the laws and rules of society," the angel says. "This child was conceived by the Holy Spirit," the angel continues. And, to top things off, the angel tells Joseph, "You are to name the child Jesus – meaning 'God Saves' – because this little *baby* is going to save his entire people from their sins." "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid..." Sure, easy for you to say...that was a lot to take in, a lot of impossible stuff to believe before breakfast. And we hold our breath...what will Joseph do?

The well-known preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes the situation this way: "According to Matthew," she writes, "the whole grand experiment hangs on what happens with Joseph. If Joseph believes the angel, everything is on. The story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born the son of David. But if Joseph does not believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If [Joseph] wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes on to the courthouse to file the divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever...[dead or disowned]" (*Gospel Medicine*, p.156).

Joseph's belief is critical in our story of salvation. And it's not simply whether or not he believes what the angel has said to him. According to Brown, "the heart of this story is much bigger and more profound than that. The heart of the story is about a [righteous] man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a cleaner, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph does not do that. He claims the scandal and gives it his name. He owns the mess – he legitimates it – and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born" (*Gospel Medicine*, p.157). It isn't just about belief...whether what God says is true or not...it is more than belief – it is acceptance and trust.

Stronger and more powerful people than Joseph were unable to accept God's plan for salvation. In Isaiah we heard the prophet offer God's support and rescue to a besieged king fighting off two enemies at once. But this king could not bring himself to accept and trust in the word of God. This king - Ahaz, instead, turned to another human king with a bigger army than what he had, and placed his hope on the worldly things he could see. Not everyone has the strength to believe God's word, and then to accept and to trust in God's word. Many say they believe but then turn to the world anyway, they place their trust in the ways of the world anyway.

Accepting and trusting in the word of God *is* challenging. It means letting go of our own opinions and presuppositions. Joseph had to let go of his idea of right

and wrong, of society's rules for achieving justice – which actually amounts to doling out punishment. By bringing the encounter of Isaiah and Ahaz into his Gospel, Matthew points out the unexpected – and often unwanted – nature of God's plans for salvation which don't match up with how the world thinks. Ahaz wanted an army, he wanted a physical battle that he would win with God's help. What he got was the foretelling of the birth of a child. This child was to be named "Immanuel", God with us. Matthew quotes this line to call our attention to the fact that, just as in the time of Ahaz, social transformation is on the agenda. The announcement of the birth of the child to Ahaz was meant to assure him of God's intent to save him and his people from the Assyrian empire. The announcement today of the birth of the child is meant to assure us of God's intent to save us from empire as well – from the lust for power, money, property, status.

Ahaz wanted an army and he was given a child – Immanuel, God with us. We want a powerful God who will overthrow oppressive governments, end poverty, bring equality, eradicate all sickness and death. What we got was a child – Emmanuel, God with us. When Hitler's army invaded Russia, the German soldiers wore belt buckles inscribed with the words "Gott mit uns." God with us. Unless we see the sign of the child it is all too easy to turn "Immanuel, God-with-us" into a call to defeat our enemies with worldly power – most often with violence. This sign – the sign of a child – matters in a world that continues to worship a vengeful God who can crush our enemies. Seeing the child as sign of God-with-us paints a different picture:

"The Word comes as a child who can be received and cannot hurt us; a Word that does not make us afraid. I am prepared for the anger of God; I believe that God

has a right to wrath. What is so amazing is that when God does come among us, whatever God's hurt or indignation, God comes not with violence, but as a child, vulnerable to our further hurt that we might receive rather than fear him" (Barbara Lundblad, workingpreacher.org). Just a couple of weeks ago we heard in Is.11:4: "he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked." God does not come with violence. God's only weapon is God's word.

Joseph is given to us by Matthew as the model we are to follow: being saved, being part of God's plan for salvation, requires changing our minds, giving up our way of thinking – social transformation is on the agenda. We are asked to learn what Joseph learned: Our knowledge of God's will is a tiny speck of sand on the beach of God's divine mind. With Joseph, we are surprised with a new righteousness as our own sense of what is right and good is shattered. We may not find ourselves in a situation as unique as Joseph's but we do find ourselves in situations challenging our idea of what God's righteousness is and catch glimpses of God's new righteousness: Churches accept the ordination of women. An abused woman discovers divorce is sometimes necessary even though she was taught otherwise. A man sits in a pew with a gay couple even though, in the past, he had thought being gay violated God's will. A congregation welcomes the newest baptized member – a child born outside of marriage when they previously thought God would not welcome such children. A man, the victim of suicide, is buried in the churchyard when a Christian burial was at one time never provided to those who took their own lives...the shattering of what we think is God's righteousness to witness God's new, unexpected righteousness.

The image of a vulnerable young peasant girl carrying the Saviour of the World in her womb is a profound sign for a world that values none of those things, that laughs at the idea of giving up power to obtain true joy and life, that waits for the other country to get rid of their nuclear weapons before they give up theirs...just in case...and so no one gives up their weapons.

God is always inviting us to new righteousness and continuously confronting us with unexpected avenues of divine love. Joseph's acceptance and trust of God's promise led him to witness the birth of the Saviour of the World: Emmanuel – God with us. Let's find out what amazing impossibilities we will be witness to as we bring 'God with us' into the world.