

December 22, 2019
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Matthew 1:18-25 Make the Nations Prove: Peaceful Joy
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 1:18-25 Common English Bible

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

This story is missing some of the parts that we might be familiar with. Luke's Gospel tells us about Mary, but Matthew's Gospel tells us about Joseph. Joseph is called righteous because he doesn't want to humiliate Mary. Joseph isn't on board with what God is doing. Joseph had legally promised to marry Mary, and they are in their time of engagement when she becomes pregnant. I can't even imagine the pain, anguish and sense of betrayal that is running through Joseph's mind. To make matters worse, Mary says that she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We assume that Joseph didn't believe Mary because the scripture tells us he decided to call off their engagement quietly. Remember their engagement was legally binding so Joseph had to divorce Mary.

Matthew's Gospel says Joseph is righteous because he doesn't want to expose Mary to that kind of shame. You might be wondering who is going to stand up for Mary? God does by intervening with Joseph. We aren't told that Joseph's heart is changed, but nine months later when Jesus is born, Joseph names the baby. Joseph takes on the role of parent, he takes Jesus as his son. This story is all about how God works within us to change our hearts, to bring us peace, to let us know that we are not alone.

The angel whispers to Joseph, believe Mary's unbelievable story. Marry her, and become the father of God's child. The child will need a father to be accepted by others as he grows to manhood. He will need, not just any father, but a father like you, capable of nurturing him, and giving him a name. Jesus will need a father like you to teach him what to do in situations like this one, when all hope seems lost and only pain remains; to model how to believe the unbelievable good news and to walk ahead in faith.

I read a story about Charles Francis Adams, a 19th century political figure and diplomat, who kept a diary. One day he entered: "Went fishing with my son today--a day wasted." His son, Brook Adams, also kept a diary, which is still in existence. On that same day, Brook Adams made this entry: "Went fishing with my father--the most wonderful day of my life!" The two had totally different perspectives on their day together.

Have you heard of Tony Campolo? He is a preacher and author who was baptized when he was 9 years old in a small Philadelphia church. A few years ago Tony Campolo was doing research in the archives of his denomination and he decided to look up the church report for the year of his baptism. He found his name and the names of two other nine year old boys. One become a missionary and one become a theology professor. Then, the report said, "It has not been a good year for our church, we have lost 27 members. Three joined and they were only children." Three children chose to be baptized and joined the church. They went on to do great things. Once again we see two very different perspectives to the same event.

Joseph had this impossible situation and he opened his heart and decided to be a part of what God was doing. He could have refused to listen to God and shut the door on Mary and God's child. But Joseph chose to listen to God.

Then, we get this funny interlude where we hear the prophecy from Isaiah about a virgin becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son and calling him Emmanuel. But, when Joseph and Mary's baby is born, they don't name the baby Emmanuel. It's like the parents are told the baby shall be called George and they name him Stephen instead. So, is his name Jesus or Emmanuel? Emmanuel isn't Jesus' middle name. Emmanuel isn't the Hebrew word for Jesus. Emmanuel is linking Jesus with the prophecy in Isaiah. Jesus is his name but he will be known as Emmanuel, God with us. This story is telling us that this larger event is signaling that God is present here and now. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Mary and Joseph weren't particularly special people. Jesus, the Son of God, was born in very humble circumstance. He could have been born to a wealthy family instead of a family of modest means. He could have been born in a palace in Jerusalem instead of a small village of little significance. But that isn't what God is doing. Jesus is born to a lowly, persecuted, itinerant, and a largely anonymous couple. Into a yet unformed family, into their insecurity, anxiety, and fears, Jesus is born.

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." God is with us no matter our circumstances. We sing that song around this time, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". We say that we want God here but there are times when we don't want God close. We think that we are doing just fine on our own, thank you very much! Our salvation, our healing, is about God being among us. God is never absent. Jesus is with us and Jesus saves us. We want God to become so present with us that God's peace, truth, love, and justice is in all the world and brings balance to what feels out-of-sorts.

We have been talking about joy. Joy resides in our inmost being. Joy is present with us no matter what is going on in the outside world. Joy gives us the strength we need to keep going. And it gives us the space to breathe a little too. Joy is this connection with God that we don't have to chase after, but we do have to discover. Joy is everlasting and tenacious and shows up at surprising times even in what St John of the Cross called the dark night of the soul.

Joy is when we are convinced that the truth of things is loving. We feel joy as we find out what God is like, because God is moving, and God's love and goodness are real. We are people who believe the light of God is always present with us.

I have a friend who has a tradition with her spouse of buying a Christmas ornament each year. They might buy the ornament on the summer trip that they took, or when they reach a milestone as a family. A few years ago, things were not good. Their jobs weren't good, their family wasn't good, they weren't doing okay. My friend was not in a mood to buy a special Christmas ornament to remember that year. My friend talked it over with her spouse and they agreed that there would not buy an ornament to remember the horrible year that they had had. But then, a few days after Christmas, they were at Target and they saw a big clearance bin of ornaments. It was clearly the remnants of decorations that no one wanted during that season. She looked through damaged ornaments, she looked through ugly ornaments and she thought to herself that zero people would want to buy these ornaments.

Then, she saw "the bird". It was oversized and brightly colored. It was crushed from having been pushed repeatedly to the bottom of the bin. It was missing a sewn-on eye and the tail was coming unglued. For unknown reasons there was even a sort of plastic fish hook attached to its head. It was also 90% off. That hideous bird Christmas ornament cost thirty-nine cents. She

said that she held it in her hands and thought, this is our ornament for this year. This bird that is thirty-nine cents and missing an eye is perfect. They took it home, added it to the tree, and now every year as they add it to the Christmas tree, they tell the story of that ornament to their kids. They share about the struggles they had that year, and they laugh at this ugly bird on their tree because that horrible year did not destroy them.

Everything wasn't great and yet God was there. God was present, loving them through it. There are some of you in this place who are experiencing real pain. Suffering comes at us in different forms and for different reasons, but it all hurts. This year for you might feel like a crushed bird instead of a big red bow. And truth be told, every year has a little bit of "the bird" in it. Every year there are things that don't go according to plan, things we grieve.

Peaceful joy, to know that God is always present with us, even in grief, even in oppression, even in loneliness, even in death, that is the gift of Christmas. God is with us and there is pain. Both of those things are true, and neither one cancels out the other. When our hearts are broken by personal loss or by tragedies in the world, we are utterly dependent on God who binds up our broken hearts. God loves us and that doesn't mean that we have to pretend that everything is great. Our grief and suffering exist. We are lost and broken, sad and alone. We are traumatized and wondering when the light will start to win. We don't have to look for the silver lining, and we don't have to put a big red bow on our suffering. Whatever you are going through isn't going to destroy you, it might feel like it is, but it isn't. And God is with us through all of it.

My favorite part of the entire Christmas season isn't the carols or the cookies. It isn't the decorations or the presents. My favorite part is when the lights are turned out in the sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Everyone is holding their candle in anticipation of what is coming, the goodness that is coming. But, for that brief moment we are in darkness. Or it feels that way. Then, we take the light from the Christmas Eve candle, and we begin to light the candles of the people around us. The light breaks through the darkness and we are singing "Silent Night" and the only light is what we have received from the Christ candle. The only light is what we have received from our neighbor who shared the light of Christ with us. And then we are ready for that verse of "Silent Night" when Robert doesn't play and it is only voices and light and peaceful joy. That is my favorite part. Thanks be to God, Amen.