

Advent 4A December 22 2019  
Matthew 1:18-25  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
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To all God's beloved in Elizabeth, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, Jesus our Brother, and Holy Spirit our Life-Giver and Friend.

*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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 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. Let's pray:*

What is the most shocking part of today's gospel? An unmarried woman. An unplanned pregnancy. An implausible explanation. What would the neighbour's think? "Did you hear? Mary's pregnant. I'm shocked. This is disgraceful. Mary and Joseph should know better. They aren't even married yet." "Well, I heard that Joseph's not even the father. How could she do that to him? He's such a good and just man." "Who is the father?" "They say Joseph still intends to take her as his wife. He's still going to marry her after all this." "This whole thing is outrageous. She and her love child should be stoned. The law requires it."

I'm sure Joseph heard the whispers and saw the stares, if not in the village then they would certainly have played out over and over again in his mind. Joseph knows this a scandal. He knows there are questions of faithfulness. The love child in Mary's womb proves that. By any measure it all seems pretty clear. Joseph will awake in the morning and do what he has to do. He will quietly send Mary away. What appears to be one thing in the light of public scrutiny, however, becomes another in the night of silence, wrestling, and revelation.

Folks, this a scandal. But it's not a scandal of immorality. The real scandal is that God is with us. We thought God was up there, or out there, maybe somewhere in the future. But then Mary got pregnant. The scandal of that pregnancy is that God is intimately present. God's holy spirit fills the womb of Mary. The wind of God is blowing through her life. The breath of God in her is so real that she begins to show like the pregnant woman she is. The scandal is that humanity can become pregnant with God.

Yes, Mary's pregnancy raises questions of faithfulness. But it's not the usual question or accusation of betrayal and unfaithfulness. Rather, this pregnancy is a statement of God's faithfulness and commitment to God's people. In this pregnancy God renews all the covenants of history and again chooses us to be his people. God's continuing promise to show up and live in the midst of our lives is fulfilled in Mary's pregnancy. This pregnancy is fleshly faithfulness.

Yes, the child within Mary is a love child. That's not, however, a euphemism for a child born to unmarried parents. No, this child is the revelation of God's love for humanity. Love that can be seen, heard, touched, smelt, and tasted. This embodied love of God will feed and nourish God's people.

Joseph's daytime resolution to quietly dismiss Mary has given way to a night of dreaming, pondering, and wrestling. Joseph's view of Mary, her pregnancy, even himself has been enlarged and opened. He has begun to see this situation, this scandalous pregnancy, through the eyes of faith rather than the stares of the villagers. Mary's story and the angel's words now speak louder than the villagers' voices.

The only reason this could happen is because Joseph entrusted himself to the night, to the inner world where angels appear, guide, and speak God's word. The night of faith shows reality to be more than the daytime drama with which we often live. It is the place where God speaks the truth about us and sees more than we



sometimes see for ourselves. It is the night of Emmanuel. Joseph experienced God with him. He found holiness hidden, where it has always been hidden, in plain sight amongst the scandals, the talk, the looks, the questions and doubts.

So, Joseph awoke in the morning and did what he had to do. He began emptying himself. He let go of fear. He let go of the villagers' voices and stares. He let go of his doubts and questions. He let go of his own reputation and standing in the community. He let go of his ideas and hopes for what his marriage to Mary might have been. He let go of the law and punishment. Joseph emptied himself so that, by God's grace and mercy, his life might become another womb of protection, nourishment, and security for Mary and her child.

Joseph would be the womb that sheltered Mary and Jesus from Herod's rage and the slaughter of the innocents. He would be the womb that safely took Mary and Jesus to Egypt. He would be the womb that sustained their lives in that land. He would be the womb that brought them back to Nazareth when the time was right.

Isn't that what a womb is? It's a place where life is created and sustained, nourished and grown. It offers security and protection. It's that deep interior place where God's breath unites with ours to create something beautiful and sacred. The womb Joseph offered was as important as the one Mary offered. Even as God was acting in Mary's womb to create new life, divine-human life, so God was acting to make Joseph's life another womb to sustain and protect that life.

Today's gospel is about Mary and Joseph, but it's also about you and me. It's about us becoming more open and receptive in this final week of Advent so that we all might give birth to God's Son in our time and our culture.

Joseph guides us to Christmas reminding us that before a womb can be filled it must first be empty. He invites us to enter the night of faith and to begin emptying ourselves of all that keeps us barren. We

must let go of all those things that make our womb inaccessible. Things like fear, guilt, resentment and anger, the villagers' voices and stares, the thoughts that say we're not enough, the doubts of God's presence, the isolation and loneliness of loss and sorrow. Letting go creates space, openness, and opportunity for God.

'He must increase, but [we] must decrease' (John 3:30), emptying ourselves until we find that we are nothing and have nothing. Then, all that's left is our empty womb which we offer with scandalous faith, in the hope that it will be filled with God, we will be re-created, the world will hear good news, and once again we will discover Emmanuel, God is with us.

That's what Joseph did. He took Mary as his wife and opened himself to something new, something different, something unexpected, something unexplainable. He opened himself to the life and possibilities God offered and he named it all, Jesus.

God entered into the muck of human existence and stirred up our expectations and religiosity enough to wake us up to a new reality. This reality is that God became one of us so that we might become his children. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century St Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "'What was achieved in the body of Mary will happen in the soul of everyone who receives the Word.'" And like Mary, all of you are also blessed and full of grace. So, may God, through whom nothing is impossible, help you to carry the gospel into this hurt and broken and beautiful world, and deliver the grace that saves people from their sins. His name is Jesus. Amen.

And the peace and presence of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.