

Advent 4A 18 December 2022
Matthew 1:18-25
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ came about in this way. Mary, the mother of Jesus, having been pledged to Joseph, but before they came together, was found having a child in her womb out of the Holy Spirit. Now, her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and not willing to publicly expose her, purposed to secretly send her away [My translation]. Let's pray: ...

Joseph was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. He's a righteous man, but what's all the fuss about? We're so used to the details of Jesus' parentage that we probably don't even give it a second thought. But an unmarried, pregnant woman at that time in Israel's history, risked being stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22). Mary's virginity would at the very least have stirred up a hornet's nest of questions, controversy, and debate.

"It's impossible for a virgin to be pregnant. What have you done, Joseph? Why? Who are you trying to kid?" It's not possible is it, saints? It doesn't fit with what we know about how babies are conceived. It doesn't make sense. There's no rational explanation for Jesus' conception and birth. And if we think it's puzzling to us, imagine what was going on in poor Joseph's head. So, he "purposed to secretly send her away."

Joseph has decided to send Mary away. We shouldn't be too surprised because that's what we tend to do when we don't understand. We dismiss what makes no sense. We turn away from possibilities that don't mesh with our ideas, beliefs, or experiences. Joseph knows that babies can't be conceived without human interaction. So do we. The problem for Joseph and for us is that what we believe is too small, too narrow, too limiting.

- How many relationships have been lost because it just didn't make sense that "those two" should be together?
- Have you ever passed up an opportunity or let go of a dream because it seemed too implausible?
- Have you ever misjudged someone because you couldn't accept their explanations and later learned what they said was true?
- Have you ever been really pumped about something you wanted to try, only to be inundated with negativity? "You? Ha! It'll never happen."

I'm sure we've all had times when we've walked away only to wish we'd waited a bit longer, made a different decision, or spent more time asking, seeking, and knocking.

We dismiss people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, dreams all the time because we either don't understand; they don't fit our usual experience or expectations, or we think they're unbelievable. In doing so, we are refusing to open ourselves to something new. Sometimes that means we refuse to open ourselves to God.

Isn't that what Joseph is doing when he decides to secretly send Mary away? Joseph is dismissing the mystery of Emmanuel, God with us. He's not only dismissing Mary; but, the Mother of God, the very one who will give God human flesh, a body, the one who makes Emmanuel possible. That's what often happens when we're dismissive. We shut out the life and opportunities God wants to birth in and through us.

I'm not suggesting that we should be gullible, or that we should blindly accept everything. I wonder, though, what we lose when we always demand answers and refuse to live with questions. I wonder how much life we miss out on because we limit it to what's familiar, what makes sense, and close ourselves to the thrill of not-knowing; something new, something different, something unexpected. I wonder if we secretly send God with us away because we search for explanations and understanding rather than trusting and entering into the mystery.

Eventually, Joseph took Mary as his wife. But first, he had to move beyond what he could comprehend. He had to allow God with us to transcend the boundaries of his knowledge. He had to let go of trying to rationalise it. It required a tectonic shift within Joseph himself.

There's no way Mary and Joseph can simply work through it themselves. Think about it. Joseph notices Mary's baby bump. She's gaining a few kilos and beginning to glow. He's hurt, disappointed, and certainly suspicious. "Where have you been Mary? Whose is it? Was it that time I was out of town? How could you do this to me, Mary?" There's really only one conclusion Joseph can make. What other possible explanation can make any sense of this? You can be pregnant or you can be a virgin but you can't be both. Mary knows that as well as Joseph. Her head must be reeling; rehearsing what she'll say to Joseph, calculating the best time and way to tell him, all the while knowing that he'll never understand. How could he? She doesn't understand because it doesn't make sense to her either.

Matthew doesn't elaborate on any of these conversations. Surely there was a lot to talk about but Matthew intentionally leaves these conversations out of his gospel because they simply don't matter. Making sense of Mary's pregnancy isn't the point. It may surprise you to hear me say that Mary's virginity isn't the scandalous part of this account.

The big scoop of this story isn't that a virgin is pregnant and gives birth. The real scandal is that God is with us. The shocker is that through Mary, God wraps himself in flesh and blood and comes to us. It means that God is with us in people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, dreams. So why would we send them away? God is with you. God is with me. God is with them. God is with us in all the circumstances and situations of our life; in joy and sorrow, in celebration and grieving, in success and failure, in hope and repair, in courage and paralysing fear. You name it, God is there with us.

That's the point of this story. Sometimes, however, this truth gets overlooked in our attempts to limit God to the confines of our understanding. It's not our place to try to explain the mystery; it is, however, a blessing to believe by faith that God is infinitely capable of far more than we can ever imagine, and rejoice that he wants to be with us. What a world of possibilities and exciting life this opens up!

Take a moment and look at the last week of your life, the last month, the last year. Who are the people you've dismissed? What relationships or opportunities have you quietly sent away? What dreams have you given up on? Somewhere in those people, relationships, opportunities, and dreams there was something that made no sense. An explanation was lacking. Something didn't match our experiences or expectations. We couldn't understand what was happening. We didn't know what to do. We couldn't get straight in our head how it could all work out so we let it go, and walked away. Another quiet dismissal. Either way, we struggled, whether consciously or unconsciously, to recognise and believe Emmanuel, God with us.

So, here's the deal. We all live on a spectrum between secretly sending Mary away and taking her as our spouse. Joseph reveals to us our own dismissive ways but he also shows us that we can take Mary and establish with her a relationship of commitment, love, and intimacy, even though there are more questions than answers. That's our final work in this season of Advent. It's our preparation for Christmas. It means that instead of trying to analyse and explain how this divine revelation could happen, we simply bask in its beauty and let the truth wash over us. It encourages us to see people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, dreams; the entirety of our life, through the lens of God with us. Instead of looking for answers, I want you to think about what might be born in us, what needs to be born in us, what's waiting to be born in us. That's how we open up to the life and possibilities God offers us. That's how we experience Emmanuel, God with us. That's what Joseph did. He took Mary as his wife and opened himself to something new, something different, something unexpected, something beyond comprehension. He opened himself to the life and possibilities God offered and he named it all Jesus, the Lord saves. Amen.

And the Son of God, Mary's Boy Child, Jesus Christ, who surpasses all human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in his love. Amen.