

OPENING SENTENCE:

Look! The young woman is with child; she will call him Emmanuel, for God is with us.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:

Gracious God, by the gift of your Holy Spirit show us the word made flesh – good news of great joy for all – so that we may sing with the angels: glory in the highest and peace on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Sermon: Birthing Pains

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

*Now the birth of Jesus 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.*

PRAYER OF ADORATION:

Glory to you, almighty God, for you sent your only begotten son, that we might have new life. Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for you became flesh and lived among us that we might become your people. Glory to you, Holy Spirit, for you direct and rule our lives. Glory to you, almighty God, and your son, Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever. AMEN.

American culture and media both load Christmas with false expectations of family harmony and good cheer. These images and expectations allow “Hallmark” and the shopping mall catalog to define the “Perfect Christmas”. In the weeks before Christmas, many who worship in our congregations invest a great deal of time and energy trying to achieve that picture-perfect Christmas. Others feel emptiness or sadness that their lives and families prevent them from having the sort of Christmas they believe they should have.

In today’s story of Mary and Joseph, God’s work often upsets comfortable social expectations and conventions. Certainly, most people would not expect incarnation to happen through the life of the young virgin girl, Mary. Many in our congregations forget just what a scandal the incarnation and the virgin birth really were, that behind the pretty nativity scene lies both a wonder and a scandal.

Today’s text reminds us that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far from “Proper”. Joseph, whom the text calls a righteous man, discovers that his soon-to-be-wife is pregnant. The narrator, Matthew, knows that it is a child of the Holy Spirit, but such things are unheard of at this point to the characters in the story. To Joseph, the pregnancy is a violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman. He decides to divorce Mary, the more humane of his customary legal options. Perhaps out of kindness, or regret, he will do this quietly in order not to shame her, and he realizes that things are not going to go as planned or as convention would have it. Mary has simply violated the important moral rule that she should not be pregnant when they were married.

The normal Jewish marriage procedure required three steps: There was the engagement. The engagement was often made when the couple were only children. It was usually made through the parents. And it was often made without the couple involved, ever having seen each other. Marriage was held to be far too important a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart.

Then there was the betrothal. The betrothal was what we might call the ratification of the engagement into which the couple had previously entered. At this point the engagement, entered into by the parents, could be broken if the girl was unwilling to go on with it. But once the betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding. It lasted for one year. During that year, the couple were known as husband and wife, although they had not the rights of husband and wife. It could not be terminated in any other way than by divorce. It was at this stage that Joseph and Mary were.

The third stage was the marriage proper, which took place at the end of the year of betrothal. So at this stage it was told to Joseph that Mary was to bear a child, that that child had been begotten by the Holy Spirit, and that he must call that child by the name Jesus. And Joseph was told that the child to be born would grow into the Savior who would save God's people from their sins. Jesus was not so much the "Man born to be King", as the Man born to be Savior. He came to this world, not for his own sake, but for us and for our salvation.

We will find that what the text stresses is not so much that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin, as that the birth of Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit. Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. In Jewish thought, the Holy Spirit had certain very definite functions. We cannot bring to this passage the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit in all its fullness, because Joseph would know nothing about that. We must interpret it in the light of the Jewish idea of the Holy Spirit, for it is that idea that Joseph would inevitably bring to this message, for that was all that he knew. According to the Jewish idea, the Holy Spirit was the person who brought God's truth to men and women. But also enabled them to recognize that truth when they saw it. It was the Holy Spirit that taught the prophets what to say; it was the Holy Spirit who taught the people of God what to do; it was the Holy Spirit who, throughout the ages and the generations, brought God's truth to men and women. So, Jesus is the one person who brings God's truth to them.

We are all like Joseph at times, are we not? We go about our business and do not want to make trouble; we just handle things quietly and without a fuss. Perhaps this text reminds us that those things we want to do loudly should be done quietly.

In light of this story, it is helpful to think about the ways that the faithful thing to do and the faithful way to be are sometimes at odds with social conventions. This is a difficult truth to learn. Joseph did not violate the convention to be politically rebellious, or even to know his own goodness. He violated conventions and remained faithful to Mary because God, as God often does, intervened in an unexpected way. God sent an angel to appear to Joseph in a dream. The angel basically said, "I know this is not what you expected, Joseph, but it is going to be OK. God is about to do something wonderful despite the fact that according to Jewish custom and law you are in a rather socially unacceptable situation.

That is the message part this text brings – that unexpected thing, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work.

Amid all our less-than-picture-perfect Christmases, the Christmas trees that are not quite as perfect as we want them to be, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something new.

Somehow Joseph has to trust this strange news: that this child is from the Holy Spirit; that he already has a name, Jesus; and that he will save people from their sins. One needs to think about what it means to be saved from sins by an infant who lies in a manger. What begins here – what God announces – is a human being who will somehow show us a different way to be. Through love or intervention – from doing something they regretted doing. How many times has the wisdom or love of another shaped our actions? The news catches Joseph off guard. At this point in the story, he is totally unaware of the journey that will take the one he will call Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the temple to the cross to the empty tomb. If Joseph were told all of that, the news might overwhelm him even more than the news he has received. So many times, God opens a door for us, or gives us a vision, beckoning us to trust and follow.

Think about times in your own lives when God has called you to do something strange and unexpected, and you just went. Poet David Whyte notes, "For most of us the call will not come so grandly, so biblically, but intimately, in the face of the one you know you have to love."

**PRAYER:**

God of grace, your eternal word took flesh among us when Mary placed her life at the service of your will. Prepare our hearts for his coming again; keep us steadfast in hope and faithful in service, that we may receive the coming of his kingdom for the sake of Jesus Christ, the ruler of all, who live and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

**BENEDICTION:**

Those are the small steps God calls us to. As Mary and Joseph journeyed to the first Christmas, they did not know where God would take them; all they knew was that something wonderful had been promised and they had been beckoned to follow. So too the text calls us to rise and follow God's call, not knowing where the journey will take us, or the path that God has set before us. GO IN PEACE.