



## Advent 4: St. Helen's, Surrey December 18, 2016

### Matthew 1:18-25

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.

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"Tell me the story of when I was born." This is a request that my adult son Evan used to make of me whenever we got together: "Tell me the story of when I was born," he would always say. And so I would go through the whole story—the town and the house where we lived before his birth, the day or two leading up to his birth, and then the day of the birth, itself. I would tell him of the drive to the hospital, the length of my labour, the thoughts and feelings I had during the hours before he arrived.

All of these things would, of course, build toward the big moment—the moment Evan appeared in the flesh, the moment his parents beheld and held him for the first time, the moment he was first called by his name.

“Tell me the story of when I was born.” Evan’s request, of course, was not just to hear the facts. Rather, he wanted to hear again about relationships and identity, about how the ways things begin inform the present and the future. And for me, the storyteller, it was yet another chance to tell Evan, and anyone else who will listen, about how I saw the world and what was important to me.

“Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way”—this is how Matthew begins the story of the Jesus’ birth. Matthew’s phrasing suggests that we’re about to hear a detailed telling of Jesus’s birth in the way that Luke might tell it. But Matthew, we will discover, is a different kind of writer than Luke. Luke tells us the story of Jesus’ birth through the experiences of Mary, a young woman without status who carries the son of God within her, and of the shepherds, those living in the fields who will be the first to hear of the birth. Matthew, however, wants to tell us about Joseph, a Jewish man whose goodness and righteousness take him far, but not all the way, as he prepares for the coming of something completely new: Emmanuel, “God with us.”

The evangelist who composed the Gospel of Matthew was probably a Jewish Christian who was addressing his Gospel to a community in conflict: Jewish Christians who were being pushed out of larger Jewish communities. And so Matthew is at pains to place his story within its Jewish heritage and to portray a Jesus whose Jewish identity is beyond doubt. He, therefore, begins his gospel by tracing Jesus’s genealogy not only back to King David, but all the way back to Abraham.

It’s within this context, then, that the focus on Joseph appears in Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth. Joseph embodies the best parts of the Jewish tradition, a tradition that was all about living within the law: those tried-and-true pattern of actions that expressed a Jew’s closeness to God and a right relationship with others.

In our Gospel for this morning we read that during the time of his engagement to Mary, Joseph discovers that she is pregnant. Joseph knows the baby is not his, and he also knows that Jewish law would find Mary guilty of adultery, an act that can be punished with death. The law mandated that Joseph divorce her. However, because Joseph is a righteous man, he also understands another part of his Jewish heritage: he understands that the law is to be tempered with mercy. And so instead of exposing Mary to a public divorce, as the reading says, he decides to dismiss her quietly, in a way that would reduce public inquiry into what has happened.

But as we see, even law tempered with mercy isn’t enough for Joseph to play his part in ushering in Emmanuel who is “God with us.” Something astonishing is needed, something that goes beyond the old patterns of action that Joseph knows so well, something that can only come to him from the shadowy, subterranean world of dreams. It is in the night, then, away from the daylight world of the law, past even the late-in-the-day tempering impulse of mercy, that an alternative explanation of what is happening comes to Joseph.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and speaks the same words that we will hear on Christmas in Luke’s gospel: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to do something outrageous in order to bring to fruition something that the law and the prophets have yearned for. Do not be afraid to do something that pitches you past any mercy you can imagine—do not be

afraid to take Mary as your wife.” This is a striking moment in Joseph’s life; all of what he knows—his life, his religion, his ethics—is being questioned by an angel in a dream, and that angel is inviting him to forsake all that knowledge and understanding to do something entirely new as a way to participate in a larger story.

I believe that we’re all a little like Joseph; we all have our tried-and-true ways of doing things, ways that have worked for us in the past, ways we rely on to work for us in the present and in the future. But perhaps there is another way for you and for me, a way that goes beyond what is tried and true and right for us, a way that even goes beyond what we think is merciful or generous. Perhaps there is another way being voiced from a dark, subterranean, and mysterious place within us. It’s a message we may be trying to avoid or dismiss quietly. And yet, if we are to take Joseph’s story seriously, it may be a message that is asking us to surrender more fully to God and, thereby, to assist the coming of Emmanuel “God with us” into our own lives and into the life of the world.

And what will our going beyond our tried-and-true ways ask of us? What will it take to listen to messages from a mysterious place and make them our own? It will take overcoming what can be that most limiting of all human emotions. It will take facing and moving beyond our fear.

It seems that throughout the Bible God is always trying to tell us this—

“Do not be afraid, Abraham,” God says, “when I ask you to leave your homeland and to travel to a new place that will be your own.”

“Do not be afraid, Moses,” God says, “for I will be with you when you, a slave, speak to Pharaoh, the king of the Egyptians.”

“Do not be afraid, David,” God says, “for the Lord will be your shepherd no matter where you are.”

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” God says, “for you have found grace with God.”

“Do not be afraid, Joseph,” God says, “to take Mary as your wife.”

“Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to act.”

In Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth, Joseph is asked to make a leap, to take an action that goes beyond how he would normally understand the law. However, in listening to the angel and taking this leap of action, he is doing what some see as quintessentially Jewish. About this, Rabbi Abraham Heschel once wrote, “A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to surpass his deeds, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.”

Today as we confirm two people who are taking a leap of action, today as we celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of that dark and mysterious season we call Advent, today may you and I listen to God’s invitation to go beyond the tried and true ways that we have known. Today may you and I have the courage to take one tiny leap of action, one tiny leap of action has the power to transform our understanding.

For Emmanuel is God with us: do not be afraid.

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[1] Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 283.

