

Emmanuel
Matthew 1:18-25
Psalm 23:1-4

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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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.

Psalm 23:1-4 (KJV)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Joseph is a man with a problem. This problem is socially awkward. And this problem is not his fault.

Joseph is a respectable man. He's descended from King David. So are a lot of people, but that's good stock. The Messiah's supposed to be descended from King David, you know. Joseph might not be a rich man or a highly educated one, but he is a reputable artisan. A measure-twice-cut-once kind of guy. The kind who thinks about things before he does them. He earns a good living. He's in a position to take care of himself and a prospective family. He is engaged to be married to this respectable local girl. And then she tells him that she's pregnant.

Joseph knows that the child is not his. He is old enough to know how pregnancies happen, and to know that he wasn't involved. Her only explanation is one that's kind of hard to believe – a story involving an angel and her being made pregnant by God.

Joseph really only has two options here: he can publicly accuse her of infidelity, or not.

If he accuses her, denies the baby is his, then the law says that she should be stoned, along with whatever man is involved. That is, they will be brought to the edge of town, and all the people of the town will throw rocks at them until they are dead. The whole community will kill them for the damage they have done to the social order.

If she won't give up the man, that won't save her. Or the baby. Joseph will be without a bride, and Mary, the young woman he loves enough to marry, will be dead. He'll live the rest of his life with the images of her brutal death.

If he does not accuse her, then that leads to other issues. Does he marry a woman who's pregnant by another man? If he does, then he is, by implication, claiming this child as his own. There will be a minor scandal when she starts showing, but it will die down. She wouldn't be the first woman already pregnant on her wedding day, and she certainly won't be the last.

Is he always going to have to worry about whether this child's father is going to show up to claim him? In a time and place where children are your only old-age-security, taking this child is taking that old-age security from another man, even if that man is the kind of man to sleep with a betrothed woman.

And, more importantly, what does this reveal about Mary? If she has cheated on him now, before they are even living together, what is she going to be like after they're formally married?

It would be one thing if she said, “This is what happened, I messed up, it will never happen again.” But she really expects him to believe this story about an angel.

Joseph has to re-evaluate everything he knows about the character of this young woman he was preparing to marry. Is he going to live the rest of his life in a state of perpetual scandal and embarrassment, as his wife sleeps around on him? He doesn't know any more.

Joseph has a problem.

He decides to do the most gracious thing he can think of here without actually believing Mary. He splits the difference. He won't publicly accuse Mary of infidelity, but he's going to quietly break off the engagement. He won't have her killed, but he won't marry her, either. This will leave him vulnerable to the assumption that he got her pregnant and then dumped her. People will assume that, even if both of them deny it. He believes that this situation is her fault, that she broke the law and cheated on him. But he is choosing to take a serious hit to his own reputation rather than let her be killed as the lawful consequences for her own actions.

Joseph decides to sleep on that decision. And then this angel shows up in his dream. The angel tells him that the child is from the Holy Spirit. This child will be a son, and Joseph is to name him Jesus. This name, *Ye-shua*, literally means “God Saves,” and it's not an uncommon name for men at this time. There are a number of other men walking around named *Ye-shua*. But, in this particular case, it's even more appropriate, as God is literally saving the people from their sins through Jesus.

By naming this child, Joseph will be claiming him as his own. He will be giving the child the social benefit of Joseph's name and legitimacy. He will be adopting this child, making him an official descendant of King David.

And all of this is happening, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he will be called Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

Joseph is a good Jew. He knows the Twenty-Third Psalm. He knows, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." He knows, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." He knows that God walks with him in the most painful and difficult times of his life. When his life is threatened, say.

Unless you're Mary, this isn't that situation.

But God is with Joseph, too.

This is the first time in the New Testament that we hear that name, Emmanuel. God is with us. Joseph needs the angel to tell him what God's plan is here. He needs the angel to tell him that God is with him.

And Joseph goes, and does the most gracious thing possible in this situation, which is to say the godliest and most God-like thing possible in this situation. He marries Mary, and he names her baby boy Jesus. With Mary, he raises Jesus. Less than two years later, he and his family become refugees in order to protect Jesus. When it would have been much easier to obey the king's command and say, "Oh, my wife's old lover's kid? He's right here, soldier." But I'm getting ahead of myself. Joseph steps forward in faith and extends grace.

Christmas time is when family stress and disfunction really come out, isn't it? I think it was Jay Leno who said that the holidays are when we get together with all our extended family to be reminded why we don't get together with them the rest of the year.¹

Part of the problem is rough edges and misunderstandings about people that normally aren't a big deal when you're not trying to have dinner conversation with them. It's easy to assume that someone you don't see is the kind of person whom you hope they would be. It's easy to assume that they agree with you about important things, or at least have some kind of a reasonable opinion. Even if you can't assume that, you can avoid thinking about it. It's harder when they're across the dinner table.

Part of the problem is that people change. When we see someone every day or every week, we don't notice, and we often don't notice that we ourselves change. But when someone whom we haven't seen in months, or perhaps since last Christmas time, shows up and they have changed, it can be jarring. Relationships have to adjust, as your kids may not be kids any more, for example.

Part of the problem is our expectations. We expect Christmas to be perfect, don't we? Even if we don't want to admit it, we have this idea in the back of our heads that Christmas will be something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, or maybe Currier and Ives.

I've had some wonderful Christmases in my life. But I don't recall one that Norman Rockwell would have painted. And that's OK.

Today is December 23. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day the day after that.

¹ I have searched for this reference online, and have been unable to find it. I believe that I remember him saying it in a monologue on *The Tonight Show*, but I don't recall when.

You may be getting ready to face Christmas alone.

You may be preparing for the descent of the Mongol Hordes.

You may be hosting a Christmas celebration.

You may be going to someone else's house for a Christmas celebration.

You may not be planning to celebrate Christmas.

Any way that works out, remember one word.

Emmanuel. God with us.

You remember, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That is God's amazing grace to us. That is God's amazing grace to us. We don't deserve it. That's what makes it grace.

When Jesus was born, God came all the way into our world and all the way into human lives. God isn't just present for the highlight reel, people in hospitals or jail or on battlefields somewhere. People in big trouble. God is present with you. Now.

God was present for Joseph. You may not have the benefit of an angel telling you what to do, but God is present for you in whatever awkward social and family situation you have to deal with.

That is God's grace to us.

That grace from God means that you can be the gracious one. That means that you can extend the grace that someone needs, even though everyone knows they don't deserve it. That's what makes it grace.

Grace is what makes it Christmas.

Thank God.

Amen.