

**Worship Series: “Expecting Grace”**

“Sent to Me?”—Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-25

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent: 18 December 2016

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“Come, Lord Jesus, fill our minds with your Word,  
Fill our hearts with your love,  
fill our lives with your light.  
Come Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.”

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Today is the fourth and last Sunday of Advent. Of all the biblical texts in the New Testament the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke are among those portions of the Bible that most people seem to know best, regardless of their degree of faith. For this reason, these texts often reside near the heart of Christian people, along with the 23rd Psalm and the “love hymn” from Paul’s letter to Corinth, chapter 13. Hear now, part of Matthew’s astonishing story of Joseph and his encounter with an angel of the Lord: Hear our day’s lesson:

18 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. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25).

Everybody likes babies, most especially at the beginning. Whenever a young mother tells me that she is going to have a baby I always want to know the details, for example, at which hospital the child is to be born and vaguely when the birth is predicted to take place, if the parents have nailed down that important piece of information. I always ask because visiting new

parents is my favorite kind of hospital visit. Many of the hospital visits I make are important, but not always under good circumstances. Yet, in virtually every case, the birth of a child is a marvelous time of celebration. The ministry never gets much better than to be in the hospital room of a newborn child.

The joy and delight of birth now prompts us to comment on the joy of the birth of Jesus—and the pain, too, if you will. In a nutshell, Joseph has a legal dilemma. Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married. Engagement in first century Israel specified a legally binding status. Legally the couple is considered married, although they are yet to live together. Of course, we soon learn from Matthew that Mary is “with child” and to most people then this could only mean one thing—Mary has been unfaithful to her marriage covenant. Deuteronomy spells out what Joseph is to do.

[23] If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, [24] you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).

According to the law, Joseph’s appropriate recourse is to “throw the book at her.” Joseph may call for the law to take its due course and as an observant Jew no one would have expected anything less of him than that. Still, Joseph reveals his deep love and respect for his betrothed by instead “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly,” as Matthew tells his story. In other words, Joseph contemplates mercy and plans to practice it.

It was at this point in our story, however, that God intervenes and an angel announces good news to Joseph. It must have seemed pretty far-fetched. The angel is quite convincing, and we imagine the news must seem pretty astonishing to Joseph. And then Joseph awoke from sleep and “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.”

Joseph, like many expectant fathers, seems rather tangential to the actual birthing of this baby Jesus. Yet by his actions, he reveals that he can look beyond the letter of the law and listen to the voice of one of God's messengers. In the back of my mind, I sometimes wondered what if Joseph had listened to a raft of other voices that no doubt swirled about him. These voices would have no doubt been voices of his parents, his friends, his carpenter colleagues, or the voices of his religious leaders. Perhaps they would have all said something similar—just follow the law. Yet, Joseph listened to something richer and deeper than merely the law. Joseph listened to the very voice of God—twice removed through the voice of an angel and in a dream.

Joseph is a sterling example of what one of the old preachers in our Annual Conference meant when Jay Darnell quipped, "Sometimes you just have to set aside your religious principles and do the right thing." If Joseph had followed the precepts of his day, then we would not be now singing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "What Child is This?" or "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice."

How often do we talk about Joseph, the father of Jesus? And yet, Joseph was willing to bear the guilt of others, to silently suffer the ridicule of the community, for the love of Mary. Joseph never says anything; at least nothing recorded in in our holy scripture. He quietly married Mary, took her to Bethlehem, then on to Egypt, and finally back home to Nazareth, where he quietly raised his family. For Joseph there are no great speeches, no poetry or songs like Mary's Magnificat. There are no Christmas card scenes of Joseph, except perhaps quietly in the background standing behind sheep, goats, and a donkey or two. Joseph softly obeyed the voice of God and became a human being of mercy (this idea from an unpublished sermon by Jan Mehlhoff).

Do you remember this story from the Gospel of John?

[2] Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. [3] The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, [4] they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. [5] Now

in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" [6] They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7] When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." [8] And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. [9] When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10] Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" [11] She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:2-11).

Here then is an Advent question that, I would guess, few of us have pondered before. Do you think that Jesus learned his great compassion from both his Heavenly Father and his earthly father? I wonder if Joseph ever told Jesus about the events leading up to his birth and Joseph's divinely inspired decision to marry Jesus mother, Mary. I suppose it is worth thinking about, don't you?