

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-17

Matthew 1:18-25

12/22/2019

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew,

18Now 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. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But 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. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22All 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.”<sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Joseph**

Good morning! What we have today is (surprise!) the birth story for the Gospel of Matthew! Our four Gospels approach the birth of Jesus in very different ways. In the Gospel of Mark, the writer just flat out ignores it. The story begins with Jesus being an adult. In the Gospel of John we get the incarnational story of the Word dwelling within God since the beginning of time... It doesn't really lend itself to children's Christmas plays. Next, we have the Gospel of Luke, which is the story we most often associate with Christmas, and we'll hear THAT story on Christmas Eve... but in the meantime, we have the Gospel of Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus.

In today's story we begin with a vision from an angel in Joseph's dream. At this time Joseph and Mary are betrothed. For a first century couple this was usually a long period of time. We're talking a year or two at the least. During that time, the soon-to-be bride would live in her father's house until the soon-to-be-groom had a home of his own, and could initiate the final step, getting married. During this time they were supposed to abstain from any marital relations... In fact, they had some strict rules on what to do if anyone did, Deuteronomy 22:22-24 writes: “*22 If a man is caught lying with the wife of*

*another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. 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."*

So what's so strange about the story is that any normal "righteous" man would follow the law, and have Mary stoned. But, weirdly, exactly because Joseph is a righteous man, he is struggling with following this strict rule. As I mentioned last year, Mary would have been around 12 years old. Could you have a 12 year old girl stoned to death?

In the Gospel of Matthew we start off with this genealogy that names all these descendants of Abraham and David, a who's-who of the Old Testament. And it counts down to Joseph, letting us know that he too is a descendant of David. Now, here is where it gets interesting. If Joseph isn't the biological father, then scripture gets a little confusing since it tells us that the Messiah will be a descendant of David. So Joseph takes matters into his own hands. He names the child Jesus. This is a throw-away detail for us modern readers, but for the ancient world this was a big deal. Normally the mother named the child, but by taking that role himself, Joseph stakes a claim on Jesus, basically adopting him into this royal family line. This tells us one major thing: God is less concerned with a genetic definition of family and more concerned with how we choose to respond to God's call.

Michael J. Brown finishes his commentary on this section of the text with the following statement: *“Our identities are determined more by the kinds of people we seek to begin the world than by our bloodlines.”*<sup>1</sup> and my man Douglas R. A. Hare writes *“Matthew, on the other hand, by selecting Joseph as his leading actor, stresses the active component in the human response. Three times Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream, and three times he must do something... The First Evangelist... insists that the human response to [God’s] saving grace must be active and not merely passive.”*<sup>2</sup>

Which brings us to a question: how to live a righteous life. In light of Joseph’s activity, I want you discuss with someone around you the follow questions:

1. What does it mean for you to be a righteous person? Does this story make you look at that differently?
2. How does Joseph’s adoption of Jesus change the way you look at the story?

Ok! I hope that was helpful. What I find so challenging about this text is that it forces me to think differently about how I understand God’s activity in the world. One writer summarizes it well saying: *“In a difficult moral situation, he (Joseph) attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous understanding of God’s will in favor of this word from the living and saving God.”*<sup>3</sup> The story challenges us all to re-

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<sup>1</sup> Blount, Brian K., et al. *True To Our Native Land: an African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Vol. VII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 74.

evaluate the way we think that God might be working in the world. Just take a look at our first reading! God, through Isaiah, offers King Ahaz ANYTHING and yet the king is afraid, he thinks small. It's as if God is asking us to think about our response differently, because maybe things are about to change, as my favorite hymn says, the world is about to turn. Amen.