

Richard Davenport
December 18, 2016 – 4th Sunday in Advent
Matthew 1:18-25

It's a little odd to hear the Christmas story a week before Christmas, but with Christmas falling on a Sunday everything's a little odd. The traditional Christmas text is the wonderful beginning of John's gospel, so it's good that we have a reading here from Matthew to give us some of the details.

The passage from John's gospel is awe inspiring. The imagery and poetry that John uses clearly show his divine guidance and express the wonder of Christmas in a way few others could. John highlights the power and majesty of God who has pitched his tent here on earth with us. The English, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," just doesn't capture what the birth of Christ means, the fulfillment of everything God had been doing at the tabernacle and temple is now found in Christ.

Luke's Gospel has a number of the other details we think of from Christmas. The angelic host singing. The shepherds tending their flocks by night. Luke's gospel also has much more of the introductory material. The annunciation to Mary. The visit with Mary and Elizabeth. The birth of John the Baptist.

Matthew's account of Jesus' birth sounds almost terse and mundane by comparison. Matthew does bring up the Old Testament prophecy to make very clear who this Jesus is, the promised messiah. He also notes the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, though even this wondrous miracle gets no real fanfare here.

The one thing that Matthew's gospel really has going for it, especially for Christian fathers, that the others don't do so well is that here we get a glimpse of Jesus' earthly father. Sadly, Joseph doesn't get much air time in the Gospels, even in Matthew's. The passage begins here by telling us that Joseph didn't even know he was going to be a dad, since he and Mary weren't even formally married yet.

He's a good and righteous man, otherwise he wouldn't be fit for the job God is giving to him. It doesn't sound like he has a lot of choice in the matter, but really he has just as much as Mary did. They both had the option and opportunity to say no and walk away, but both listened and trusted in the Lord.

Joseph is put in a rather untenable position. It's pretty clear, especially to him, that this child isn't his. A divorce on the grounds of infidelity isn't something God likes. No divorce is good. However, it is one that God allows. Joseph could have made a public spectacle of it too. Presumably Mary had been sleeping around, so not does he have to break off the whole thing and suffer the social effects that will come with it, but she's also attacked him directly. She shattered their relationship and all of the time and emotional investment were for nothing. At least, that's what's probably going through his head during all of this. The fact that he is trying to break it off quietly is a testament to the kind of man he is. It isn't out of weakness and inability to deal with the issue that directs him along this path. He is a compassionate man who tries to resolve the situation without causing more grief.

But God had planned all of this for a very long time. Knowing what Joseph knew, there was no fault in his actions. God stepped in and assured him this was all according to plan and was nothing to fear. This is God fulfilling the long awaited prophecy. This is Immanuel. This is God coming to be with his people once more. This is not reason to fear. This is a reason to celebrate the goodness and mercy of God.

It's unfortunate we don't know much more about Joseph. The Bible just doesn't give us more than a few details. He is clearly a protector and provider. He wants to do what is right and godly, but he can never be more than a surrogate father for Jesus. Still, as a good and godly man, he does everything an earthly father should do. He teaches his children the fear of the Lord, a practice he lives out from the very beginning. True, Jesus has a knack for this sort of thing, being the perfect and sinless Son of God. But, that really doesn't change Joseph's job here. Had Adam and Eve never eaten the fruit, their children would have been born and would want and need to learn these things too. Adam and Eve would tell them about creation and about all of the animals, as well as what their role on earth is. The difference for Jesus and for anyone else who is perfect and sinless is that there isn't any of the doubting, questions, and forgetfulness all of the rest of us have as we learn about God.

Unfortunately, only Matthew's gospel has some of the big events that follow this. Matthew jumps ahead a bit to the visit from the magi. This event starts to clue us in on the scope of what God will be accomplishing through the life of Christ. After that, King Herod, in his jealousy, murders the male children in the area while Joseph takes his family to Egypt after God warns him in a dream. Again, Joseph is put in a tough spot, but he allows God to direct him and so is able to protect his family from harm.

For all that Matthew's gospel is missing, it has some things that are vitally important, even here in the nativity narrative. When you look at Jesus, you read about what he did and who he is, it's very easy to put him in a box, to focus on one aspect of his life and cut out everything else. Jesus is a healer. He restores sight to the blind and makes the lame to walk. He gives life even to the dead. Jesus is a comforter. He consoles the suffering and tells them of his kingdom. Jesus is a teacher. He shares the wisdom of God with all of those who will listen, so that they will grow in their faith and in the fear of the Lord. Jesus is a judge. He confronts the unrepentant by reminding others of the penalty for sin. Jesus is the glorious king. He is the one who will return and reign over creation forever in a world free from sin. Jesus is the savior. He is the one who dies that we might live.

It's easy to cut out the aspects of Jesus that we don't really like or that don't really feel pertinent to our needs. It's easy to focus on those aspects of Jesus and his life that we like and that feel comfortable. We can read the nativity account. We can sing "Silent Night" in the dark by candlelight. We can go home on quiet December evening and return again on bright new Christmas morning. We can look at the scene. The inn there with Mary and Joseph on their own. We can watch them on their own struggling through the labor and finally that joyous moment of birth. The savior is born! The animals gather round. The angels sing. The shepherds watch in awe and wonder. The world knows its first moment of true peace since Adam and Eve ate the fruit so long ago.

It's so easy to lose yourself in this moment, this perfect, peaceful moment. It's so easy to miss the point of all of this. But Joseph doesn't. Joseph recognizes right from the beginning that there is a problem. Jesus' birth doesn't jive with the way the world works. He's confused and trying to do the right thing, what he knows is supposed to be done. He sees this again a little while later after the magi leave. Satan is already marshalling his forces against Christ, bringing suffering and death to many.

Even here, at Jesus' birth, death is already present. The cross already looms in the distance. Jesus is here for one overriding purpose and only the Spirit's guidance will help anyone else to understand and follow. The moment of peace and joy at Christ's birth is a brief interlude. All seems bright and glorious here as God is now with us, but the reality is the world

is dark and there is only one tiny light in it, a light that in time will be snuffed out as well.

The arrival of the messiah is a wonderful thing and we should celebrate. God has come to be with us. The messiah has come, the only one who can save us from our sins. God has worked miracles here and heaven and earth have come to praise the king. But, to tell the story of Christmas is to tell the story of the one who has come to die. This is a baby who must die in order that the world might live. This is a baby who has come to die for you. With the way we typically treat the Christmas account, it sounds as though this is one of those “happily ever after” stories where Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus go home to live out their days in peace. But it isn’t. This is a family that will soon have to flee for their lives because the world fights back against the one who has come to destroy it so it can be remade. This is a baby who already sees the cross and knows what he must do.

There is much to celebrate this Christmas season. There is time with family we look forward to. There are hymns and carols we enjoy especially this time of year. There are traditional meals to eat and decorations to put up. There is much to celebrate and Christmas Eve and Christmas Day can and should be times of peace and joy. But as you hear again the story of Christ’s birth, as you set up your nativity scene, as you hang your decorations and cook your meals, remember who this child is and what he came to do. Remember he came to save sinners. Remember that he came here for you and for me. Remember that he looks to the cross and knows he must die so that you can live. Keep the whole story of Jesus in mind.

When you have the whole story in mind, the peace and joy you find at Christmas become just a sample of what awaits you at the end. Jesus dies for you, but Jesus rises and returns for you as well. Jesus brings his kingdom for you where you find peace and joy forevermore.