

“The World As It Is”

Sunday, December 4, 2016

Second Sunday of Advent

#2 in series: *A WAITING THE ALREADY*



(Matthew 1:18-25, NRSV)

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

Matthew’s “birth narrative” doesn’t really end where we stopped reading this morning.

He goes on to introduce us to King Herod the Great, the villain of the piece, who hears about Jesus and reacts with paranoia.

His lust for power drives him to seek out this child with violent intent.

Matthew's is also the only gospel to mention the Magi or Wise Men.

They really belong in the time of the Epiphany rather than Christmas, but Matthew uses their characters to underscore the tension and drama that plays out.

This is a story that might grab the tabloid headlines today.

There is scandal, political intrigue, and lethal plotting.

You could easily take this story, change a few details, and set it in 21st Century America.

There is much about this story that talks about the world as it was then and the world as it still is today.

Let us pray...Lord, this morning we gather to hear a story that sheds light on events swirling around the birth of Jesus. Lead us to new understanding today and help us see how this tiny child leads us to live in our world as it is. In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen.

“The world as it is.”

“The world is what it is and we just have to live in it and try our best to get through life, hoping for something better on the other side.”

That seems like a defeatist perspective.

Doesn't sound much like, ***“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,”*** to me.

Maybe that's why it sometimes feels like there is dissonance in our caroling and tension in the air this time of year.

Everywhere we turn, the culture wants us to believe that the world as it is, if only for a moment, puts its normal programming on pause.

This is the season of good cheer, by golly, so be of good cheer – or else!

But we all know better; there **is** darkness, brokenness, and heartache in the world as it is.

What's interesting to me about Matthew's version of the Christmas story is that he acknowledges the darkness and guides us to finding the light.

Let us consider **Joseph**:

For modern audiences, the story of Joseph and Mary might be splashed across the tabloids.

An unmarried young woman becoming pregnant was a much bigger scandal back then.

Luke's gospel gives us Mary's side of the story, but Matthew tells it from Joseph's point of view.

Matthew says he is "*a righteous man*"; this puts him in the company of people like Noah and Job.

These righteous men of the Bible often faced suffering, despite doing all the right things.

Joseph was a good man; he had a good job, he was involved in his community and was well-respected.

He loved Mary and planned to build a life with her. But, for all his good intentions, suffering came knocking on his door.

He is just one of many examples that have us asking, *“Why do bad things happen to good people?”*

When we consider the world as it is, we realize that the righteous **do** suffer.

Last week, Mark’s gospel challenged us to stay on the straight and narrow.

Matthew tells us, that despite our best efforts, we are still subject to the forces of injustice and oppression that seem to prevail in our time.

What is most important, however, is that we notice what the angel says to Joseph.

He does **not** tell this righteous man, *“Don’t worry, your problem is solved.”* Or, *“Good news! Things are going to get better!”*

He certainly doesn’t tell him, *“Buck up, Joe, it’s the first Christmas! It’s the most wonderful time of the year!”*

Instead, the angel gives Joseph one simple, powerful message: ***“Don’t be afraid...”***

What I hear in the angel's words is a challenge,
not false hope.

On the one hand, the angel acknowledges all that
has happened to the young couple and
understands their fear.

But, this is a call to resistance and a refusal to let
outside circumstances consume Joseph with
fear and disillusionment.

If “*awaiting the already*” in Matthew's gospel first
means acknowledging the reality of a broken
world, it also means **refusing to live in fear.**

What is incredible about the angel's words is that he
offers no proof that what he says is true.

There is no evidence that this baby comes from the
Holy Spirit, there is no pregnancy test, no
DNA.

There is only a promise – go ahead with your
plans, keep your family together, and this child
will be the Savior of the world.

You see – Joseph has a choice.

He can take the angel at his word and choose the *difficult thing...*

OR he can give-in to the pressures of the prevailing culture in his community and do the *expedient thing*.

He can save Mary's life and preserve her dignity, which puts **his** reputation on the line...

OR, he can save himself and cut Mary loose.

Obviously, we all know what Joseph chose to do.

But Matthew does not want us to jump on to the happy birthdays without first taking some time to think about the complexity of his choice.

It is a similar choice that Matthew will later describe in Chapter 2 when he tells the story of the Magi.

In a world that is so broken, where we are tempted to bend toward the culture, do we choose God's way or the easy way? ⁱ

This sets up one of the central themes of Matthew.

We must stay focused on the daily choices that we face; there are plenty of everyday challenges.

These seemingly small choices have a stake in our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Every step we take is a step along our journey **toward** Jesus or *away* from him.

There are strong elements of **fear** in this story.

Fear was a prevailing force in Jesus' world.

For Joseph, it was fear of scandal and consequences.

Mary's pregnancy not only threatened her well-being, but Joseph's reputation and business affairs.

For Herod, there was a paranoid fear of losing control over his power and authority.

In fact, the backdrop for much of Matthew's gospel is littered with fearful, menacing forces, threatening the lives of God's people.

The Good News comes as Matthew wants us to use the imminent arrival of Jesus to confront our fears.

Matthew invites us to find the presence of Jesus in the midst of our world just as it is, right now.

There are two familiar stories that we find only in Matthew's gospel that help us see where Jesus is...*already here*.

In Matthew 25, we find the “*Parable of the Sheep and the Goats*.”

The story concerns a heavenly king whose reign extends to the end of time.

When the time comes for final judgement, the king separates the people into two groups – the sheep and the goats.

The grouping is based only on whether or not they cared for the king while he was on earth.

Both groups ask, “*Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?*”

The king's response is simply that when they did or did not care for “the least of these,” they did or did not care for the king.

We often talk about this parable in terms of what it means for us as we do our best to be in mission to the hurting people of the world.

There is nothing wrong with this interpretation, but it may be missing Matthew's larger point.

If you are waiting for Jesus to come back some day, then **stop waiting**.

You can find him, right here on earth, right now.

All you have to do is look into the eyes of the marginalized and the oppressed.

When we see their faces, we see the face of Christ.

“To love another person,” Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Miserables*, *“is to see the face of God.”*

The other story that only Matthew tells is ***The Great Commission***.

It's certainly a challenge for us to, *“Go and make disciples of all nations,”* and that is clearly what Jesus wants us to hear; but, there is more to the story.

Jesus' last words are: *"Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age"*
- It seems clear what Jesus is saying here.

When he ascended into Heaven that day, he did not leave an absence...He is always with us, every day, and will be with us until the end of time.

Again, what Matthew wants us to realize is that, if we are waiting for some moment in the future to see Jesus face-to-face, we need to stop waiting - Jesus is already here.

That brings us back to the beginning of Matthew's gospel, where his is the only one who gives us the name we most closely associate with Jesus at this time of year...Emmanuel, God with us.

It makes perfect sense, and it is the message Matthew wants us to remember, again and again.

Matthew's birth narrative may not be the pastoral scene we expect this time of year, but it is rich with hopeful meaning for us.

He acknowledges the presence of fear in our broken world.

He offers us a guarantee of God's presence with us, here and now.

And, he shows us God's promise to provide constant faithful care to restore and heal us.

In the end, Mathew gives us a solid foundation to live your life without fear amid troubling times.

The "*world as it is*" urges us not to fret about tomorrow or to get stuck in yesterday, but to focus on the gift of this present moment.

No matter what you may be going through right now, God is in it.

Your life may look like Joseph's, faced with impossible choices; the pain of your struggle may be so intense that you cannot see through the fog.

"May you experience that 'awful grace of God' in the midst of your lives, in every present moment. May you come to know the joy that

comes in trusting God in the midst of your hardship, as you take your journey through the ups and downs of life, one step at a time. And remember: Emmanuel. God is with us.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ deVega, Magrey R., *Awaiting the Already*, © 2015, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. Page 34