

Matthew 1: 18-25 “The Man at the Manger” Rev. Janet Chapman 12/22/19

We have arrived at the 4th Sunday of Advent and our scripture brings us to the doors of Bethlehem. The baby is due anytime, and all we have to do now is wait. It is hard to wait, especially in a hospital. Sometimes the most miserable room in a hospital is the waiting room – just ask my daughter Mikayla who played an adult role this week by sitting and waiting for me during my surgery. I know how hard it can be. You don’t have any information, you imagine the worst even though they say it is a simple procedure. You stop every nurse, “No, sorry that’s not my patient. The doctor will be out later. Maybe we will know more tomorrow.” That sort of thing. You’re helpless. You can’t do anything. So you start flipping through magazines, blankly watching the TV, cleaning out your coat pockets – anything to pass the time until someone eases your anxiety. Joseph, the soon-to-be father, must have gone through a great deal of worry waiting for the birth of Jesus. Joseph, that character in the nativity story that we hear very little about, but who is central to our scripture on this 4th Sunday of Advent. Joseph is that man at the manger whom we sometimes confuse as one of the shepherds when we set up our nativity scenes. Joseph is that one rarely seen alone in artwork, unlike Mary or the baby, rarely sing about in church, rarely focus upon in comparison to all those others who show up at the manger. But this morning, Joseph is front and center having been introduced through the Matthew 1 genealogy of Jesus, which is almost as complete as ancestry.com.

You may have caught this morning that there is a typo in the sermon title which could be attributed to me coming off anesthesia. The title was supposed to be “The Man at the Manger” but somehow “Manager” slipped in. So not being one to let a mistake go unredeemed, it got me to wondering if Joseph indeed had some managerial tendencies? After all, he is considered the patron saint of cabinetmakers, confectioners, engineers, immigrants,

house hunters, travelers, pioneers, pregnant women, fathers, and married people as well as a whole host of cities across the world. There is a lot of management that goes on in those areas, and certainly as our scripture begins, Joseph is knee deep in the role of husband-to-be, pretending to be interested in china patterns and bridesmaids dresses, securing the rabbi and venue, working hard in the carpentry shop to pay the florist and caterer, and corresponding with his groomsmen about the bachelor party. Engagements in those days were managed down to the last detail. They were a legal thing; you didn't get engaged at Mt. Shasta on some Saturday hike – it was serious business, and it could be broken only by going to the courts. In effect, it was the same as marriage and binding in nature. So Joseph was engaged, may have been engaged for years, as the two families came together, signed the papers, and when both parties became of age, they were to be married.

Things are being managed quite well until Joseph learns the unthinkable – his fiancé is pregnant! There is nothing remotely manageable about this revelation. His life is suddenly in shambles, his trust betrayed, his future undone, and his insides torn up. After all, he is not responsible for Mary's unplanned, unforgivable, indefensible, inexcusable pregnancy. He wants to ask her how this happened, but honestly, he really doesn't want to know. Nor does he want his buddies at work to laugh and say, "Joseph, you sly dog – didn't know you had it in you." So what can he do? Joseph is a good man, a righteous man but how does one know what is the right thing to do? Dr. Fred Craddock points out that there are two options available to Joseph. First, you can get the opinion of people you trust. Somerset Maugham once said that the most fundamental and strongest disposition of the human spirit in civilized society is to get the approval of the people around you. So go to the coffee shop, "What do you think I ought to

do?” Get on the phone, Facebook, Twitter, take your problem to work, tell everybody. “Did you hear about Mary? What should I do?” But Joseph won’t go that way. He won’t disgrace her, expose or humiliate her. Then what is he going to do? There are some friends at church who say, “Just do what the Bible says. You can’t go wrong if you do what the Bible says.” So what does the Bible say – Deuteronomy 22 says, “She is to be taken out and stoned to death in front of others.” That is what the Bible says. I kind of get sick and tired of people always thumping the Bible as though you can just open it up and turn to a passage that clears everything up. You can quote the Bible before killing a person to justify the killing, an eye for an eye kind of stuff. Do you know what the Bible says? “If a man finds something displeasing in his wife, let him give her a divorce and send her out of the house.” It’s in the Book – do you know what else? “Let the women keep their heads covered and their mouths shut.” Do you want me to show you? I run into so many people who carry around a 43 pound Bible and say, “Just do what the Bible says.”

Joseph is a good man, and he rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time. Joseph is one who understood that carpenter’s quote, “Whether you are working with wood or with people, the Lord provides a way to overcome your difficulties, but you must have patience and trust.” Joseph loves his Bible and he knows his Bible, but he reads his Bible through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of a God who is loving and kind to all people. He reads his Bible through the lens of a God who doesn’t choose one 2 year old over another to resurrect just because someone says it is so. Therefore, Joseph says, “I will not harm Mary; I will not abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, dignity, or worth. I will protect her.” Where does it say that, Joseph? In your Bible? I’ll tell you

where it says that. It says that in the very nature and character of God. It is absolutely amazing that Joseph is the first person in the New Testament who learned how to read the Bible. Like Joseph, we are to read it through the spectacles of the grace and goodness and love of God. If in reading the Bible, you find justification for abusing, humiliating, disgracing, harming, hurting, or deeming one life more valuable than another in God's eyes, especially when it makes you feel better about yourself, you are absolutely wrong. The Bible is to be read in the light of the character of God.

Through an angel, God said to Joseph in a dream, "I want you to take Mary as your wife, take care of her. Love and raise this child." God instructed Joseph to raise and feed this baby, which some may have found really hard to do. But once you have fostered a child, once you have adopted someone else's child, I will tell you that it is not as hard as you think. Love is far bigger than we give it credit for. Even when the child doesn't share your features, even when 23andme gives a whole different genealogy between parent and child, God plants a seed of love which grows and blossoms over time which transcends blood relations. We in the church can be like Joseph, not just in such areas, but also every time we go beyond the culturally appropriate good deeds like Christmas gifts for poor families into bolder, more riskier deeds like welcoming a mother just released from prison, like hosting a baby shower for an unwed pregnant 15 year old, and even advocating for humane treatment of incarcerated women in labor.

Taking some time to consider this man at the manger, this manager who released control and trusted God, I am aware that Christmas has already started for me. This is because when Jesus is born, this man who will teach him, raise him, care for him, show him how to be a

carpenter, take him to the synagogue, teach him his Bible, and model for him lessons on how to be a good man will do right by him. When you have somebody like that, it is already Christmas, and Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says, "I will do what is right." What is right is to read Scripture and the human condition in the light of the love, grace and kindness of God. As long as there is one in every community, it will be Christmas. The question, of course, is whether or not you will be that person?