

Pastor Mollie's Sermon
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Matthew 1:18-25
December 22, 2019

Did you catch it? The Christmas story according to Matthew?

Well if you missed it I don't blame you.

I mean, the whole "birth narrative" takes up just two bracketing verses.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. [Joseph] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Yeah, that's it, two verses book-ending the larger story and drama of the turmoil this birth created.

Which kind of begs the question: Could you start your depiction of the life of the Messiah in a more matter-of-fact way?

Two measly verses.

If you sneezed, you might just miss it.

But while I miss the fuller description Luke gives -- with mangers and shepherds and angels and all the rest --

There is something fitting about Matthew's limited illustration.

Because, truth be told, most people *did* miss it.

The local news team didn't follow Mary's pregnancy the way they might a sports playoff or presidential election.

There were no camera crews or gaggle of first-century reporters awaiting the birth.

There were no baby showers beforehand or baptism invitations afterward.

From all we can tell from Matthew's story, just about no one noticed.

Which is why Matthew wrote, of course.

He lifts his pen to record, if only in a few sentences, the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, and in this way bears witness to an event most of the world ignored.

Except it wasn't as if the world actively ignored anything.

It was just a birth, like millions of others, kind of unremarkable in every possible way.

Now, before I continue- by no means am I trying to come across with a "so what" attitude or negative spin to this birth story...

but to paint a picture of how **extraordinary came from ordinary**.

Mary and Joseph aren't merely characters from a stained-glass window, but flesh and blood people.

And the more we can imagine them as people *like us* -- with ups and downs to their relationships, - the more we might imagine ourselves to be people *like them* --

that is, people who go through all kinds of things, some quite damaging, and yet whom God uses nevertheless to accomplish God's purposes.

Jesus came as one of us.

Jesus was born like we are, lived as we live, loved and laughed and suffered as we do.

And died as we will die.

And on the third day, God raised him from the dead, that we might no longer live in fear of death.

But I'm getting ahead of the story.

For now we are drawn into how Matthew paints a picture of the utter *normalcy* of the holy family.

Which means, of course, he tells us about the complexity, of this family, just like every other family.

Indeed, there is nothing exceptional about this couple or birth ...

except that God works through it to draw near to us in love, grace, and salvation.

God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people, and that God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death *and* rebirth as God's Children.

All of this helps flesh out the name "Emmanuel" that Matthew draws from Isaiah to apply to Jesus.

"God with us." God coming to be with us as we are.

Not as we know we should be,

or are trying to be,

or have promised to be,

or will be some day,

but with us as we are now...today...in this moment.

Perhaps that's the promise at the heart of this passage –

that as God came before to be with, use, accept, and honor Joseph and Mary at the birth of Christ,

so also God comes to us in Christ to be with us,

use us for good, accept us as we are, and honor us by God's own presence.

PAUSE

"God with us" may not always be seen as good news.

It depends on who we think God is.

It depends on how we think God is active in the world.

It depends on who we need God to be.

Perhaps both viewpoints are here in our own pews today.

On the one hand we could have...

God with us -- "That's great! I need God close, I've missed God.

I have a lot to tell God.

God is committed to improving my life and the lives of those I love."

Or on the other hand we may have...

God with us -- "Oh, no...not now... I am not ready.

This Advent time of preparation has not gone as planned.

I don't really want God that close because if God is,

then God will likely see more of me than I want God to see.

God is coming to expose my life and call me out for all of my faults of faith."

No matter what side you relate to this day...

both groups could benefit from knowing the perspective of the other.

Those of us happy to have God around might profit from remembering that this is *God* we are talking about.

And sometimes, God is not our BFF, but has some hard truths to tell,

truths we would rather not hear but are necessary to know.
Those of us reluctant to have God near by,
even afraid of God's presence,
would do well to recall that God's truth-telling comes from a place of love and relationship.
God does not always come to us from a place of frustration, anger, or disapproval,
but because God needs to be near even if we have chosen to keep God at bay.
So on this last Advent weekend- may we be sent into the celebration of Christmas
With the notion that
"God with us" is fundamentally the fullest confession of the both/and of God.
God became incarnate.
God, in Jesus, is never one or the other, but miraculously, mysteriously both God and human.
"God with us" is God's very own sermon. God tells the truth about God's self --
I am here --
as an expression of love and relationship.
How that truth gets heard might change depending on where we are,
but its truth never changes because of who God is.
God is with us, really and truly as we are.