

**REDEFINING FAITH; MATTHEW 1:18-25; ADVENT IV, DECEMBER 22, 2019;  
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If you are gasping for breath, trying to keep up with Matthew, you're not alone. We've had little respite these past weeks from the spiritual obstacle course he sets up telling the story of Jesus: warning the disciples in week one this business-as-usual world was about to be turned upside down, then in weeks two and three back to back installments of John the Baptist putting the planet and every one on it, on notice of the coming fire.

Today, we have nothing short of a humiliating social scene; Joseph contemplates breaking off his betrothal to Mary over her apparent adultery; which in their world of arranged marriages and proud families would not have gone down particularly well. Such a break up over such a charge was considered so egregious a violation that the adulterer was put to a public trial then executed.

Sorry to say, Matthew doesn't provide much holiday cheer. His story is utterly at odds with what we've made of Christmas in our shop-a-holic world of Black Friday's and Cyber Monday's. But Advent as we've been saying year after year *is about* preparing *our hearts* for the coming of Jesus. The problem is two thousand years later, hearing a story we know as well as our social security number holds no surprises because the film of familiarity covers its sharp edges and muffles its urgent plea.

Or, if our ears have been pricked and our pre-Christmas rush stifled, this birth and the preparation for it is nothing less than entering a strange, new land like Narnia that we discover like the children in the story through the back of a wardrobe closet; a whole new world sidled up to the one we know, waiting for us to enter.

A land where the birth of the Savior of the World hangs on the dream of a peasant carpenter who rejects his best instinct and takes a path that will change the course of humanity. If there's anything to learn from Joseph, a righteous man, who carried out the will of God, it is that sometimes the plans we make for the most noble of reasons get overturned by the very God we seek to serve.

Joseph accepts Mary's predicament and stands by her and her son. Next week they flee Palestine because Herod is killing infant boys under the age of two; but upon their return Joseph fears for the safety of the child if they go back to Jerusalem, so they flee, again, like refugees to Galilee. The story has barely begun. Joseph has to wonder what he got himself into.

Who can identify with Joseph? For some of us, when Christ was born into our life, when God became real for us, it was maybe a rite of passage, a pleasant, reassuring, experience. We said, "I don't know what all this means but I'm open to where it leads."

And there are at least a few here today like Joseph. When God came to us, when it was our own personal "God with Us" experience, we didn't know what to say. It all seemed strange, so out of the ordinary and unexpected, maybe even unsought and un-wanted, that we said little while we followed the breadcrumbs.

Someone asked an her: "how has your life improved now that you are a Christian?" She said, "I wouldn't say that my life improved; I'd say I had a pretty good life. Things were going well. Then I gave my life to Jesus and my boyfriend broke up with me, I began going to church rather than places I used to go. I lost some friends. I wouldn't say my life 'improved' I'd say God improved me; I became a disciple rather than just a believer."

Here's something to consider: Joseph and Mary are not following a set of rules – Joseph rejects the biblical trial and death penalty for the adulterer; he even decides against breaking things off with Mary which he thinks is the kindest thing to do because some angel or inner voice calls him to embark on a risky path. Faith is not about following rules and playing it safe.

Nor is our faith about adhering to an ideology or philosophy we turn to, to understand our circumstances and determine how to proceed. That may be true for politics or economics but not Christian faith. God's message to Joseph and Mary is not based on a philosophical argument or theological treatise.

What this story underscores is that faith is about a relationship with a living God. This is the problem our age has with God – God cannot be quantified, reduced to a formula, or proven in any test known to science – the gatekeeper of the world's so-called reality. Rather, this relationship is grounded in the heart and occupies the soul, and is evidenced in the conduct of the believer and the risk-taking behavior of the community.

Here's something else to consider: the name Jesus' parents are instructed to give him is "Jeshua" or Joshua or what becomes Jesus which translated means: Yahweh helps; also translated as Emmanuel or "God with us." Our hearts don't change because we stick to a set of rules; we don't become new people under the aegis of an intellectual system; Jesus' name Emmanuel doesn't translate "Christian theology with us"; it translates "God with us."

Jesus disrupts our settled ways and inspires us to be better than ourselves by his demonstration of what it means to love God and our neighbor.

We change when we are in relationship to Jesus who is with us always; helps us see opportunities to do the right thing even when it's the last thing on our mind or goes against what we'd be inclined to do; just as Joseph did with Mary, and to experience a power to be kind or courageous or sacrificial in ways we never thought possible of ourselves.

Which reminds me of a story The Reverend Ray Kiely, pastor of this congregation in the 1960s told about his long-term marriage to his wife Martha.

After about 60 years of marriage Marth's friends would ask her, as Ray would tell it, "you mean you've been married to the same man for all those years?" To which Ray claims his wife would respond, "Of course not! He's not the same man, I changed him a long time ago."

I'd bet Martha would say the same about Ray; deeply bonded relationships have a way of making us into different persons.

Let us be clear; Matthew is not saying Jesus is to be a great man, a great historical figure; rather he is to be the deliverer of his people – not specifically identified as Hebrew but who become in the parables he tells and metaphors he uses – all people.

Matthew declares the deliverance Jesus will bring to 'his people' will be from their sins, and he is silent about their political exploitation by the Romans.

But when they are saved from their sins – which means literally from their separation from one another and from God, even from the creation itself – when they are saved from their overdeveloped egos that have all the symptoms of a narcissistic disorder, all kinds of wonderful things begin to happen that alleviate the injustices they perpetrate on one another.

Resources are shared, movements are started to improve life in all sorts of practical, tangible ways; solutions are found for maladies; lives are dedicated to causes larger than one's personal material success and well-being; and on and on; humans are freed to serve one another, to love one another and just like in Narnia, the ice of guilt and revenge in personal relationships and the harshness of social injustice, suffering and oppression begin to melt and trickle away.

This is the new beginning Joseph helps inaugurate because he listens to a dream that resonated deeply within his conscience and then changes course and makes a decision in a relationship that transforms him and his family; his righteousness doesn't mean that he was 'right' all the time but that he could see that maybe he was wrong and then follow another way that was unknown and even ill-advised.

There is no set of rules or theological system that could have gotten him there; only something like a voice, a relationship with a God who lives, a God who is with us and helps us.

I trust the stockings in your house have been hung with care and that the tree is trimmed and most of your shopping and gift buying is accomplished. If not there's still time to do that last-minute search for just the right gift for the special people in your life; or to find that old recipe for the holidays that your mother passed down; or to just sit in front of the tree with a cup of tea or cocoa.

But there's also time to listen like Joseph for the voice of an angel in a hymn or dream or in the words of a loved one or even a stranger and prepare your heart for a change of course, an act you never thought possible, some righteous response in some situation you thought you'd rather sweep under the rug.

We'll open the gifts and sip holiday cheer and gather with family and friends; but Christmas will finally come when we like Joseph and Mary inaugurate a new age in our homes and communities; when we become like them and like that new Christian who said God made her not just a believer but a disciple, a follower of a living God, born to be king, born to save his people from sin. Amen.