



“Love for a Son”

Scripture – Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, December 22, 2019

The scripture reading is coming – just not yet. Before we look at the gospel reading for today, I want to hear from you. I do not have any “plants” in the congregation I have asked to speak up, so I need your help or we might have an excruciatingly long period of silence!

Today is the final Sunday of Advent, and at Westminster, we often follow a tradition that designates a major Christian theme with each Sunday. On the three previous Sundays of Advent, we have celebrated peace, hope, and joy. On the fourth Sunday, our focus is “Love.”

This is where I need your help. I want us to ponder love. What is love? Rather than a definition, I would like you to share a brief illustration of love. What does love look like? Love is staying up all night with a sick child. Love is...give us an example.

Just days before Christmas, the gospel reading highlights what we would expect: the birth of Jesus. The story has captured the imagination of millions over the centuries and prompted endless speculation. The story answers this question: If the Creator of heaven and earth decided to reveal the divine identity, what would be the best way to do it?

If God were asking our advice on how best to reveal divinity, we might suggest: a thundering voice from the clouds; or an announcement writ large across the sky; or the melting of all weapons of war. If it were to happen in our day, it would undoubtedly be a striking message posted on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – along with a selfie!

As we know, God chose none of these compelling options. Instead, God chose to be revealed through a fragile human being. And when we ponder the birth of this person, God’s choice seems to be either ludicrous or miraculous.

Here is how Matthew tells the story. (*Read Matthew 1:18-25*)

While we celebrate the birth of Jesus with exuberance, the story did not begin with jubilant parents thrilled about having their first child. Mary, a young peasant girl engaged to be married, breaks the news to her fiancé that she is going to have a baby. The news is not cause for rejoicing. It is frightening for Mary because Joseph believes he is not the father. It is crushing for Joseph, because his life will not unfold as he had dreamt. There will be no celebration of their announcement, no festive wedding to share with their community, and no baby shower after the appropriate number of months.

Obviously, this story relies on the assertion by the gospels of Matthew and Luke, that Mary was a virgin. However, what I find most fascinating about this story is what it tells us about Joseph.

Joseph has a tortuous dilemma dropped in his lap and it must have made him furious. According to harsh, patriarchal law, Mary has committed adultery and could be stoned. When Mary broke the news to Joseph, I wonder if that awful option crossed his mind.

However, Joseph is a person of character so he will not let his anger get the best of him. Our passage indicates that Joseph is a righteous man. According to first century Judaism, doing what is right included the double standard of not associating with women of questionable virtue. But, to his credit, Joseph decided not to make a tawdry display of her situation. So he decided to dismiss Mary quietly. While this has a touch of compassion, it still leaves Mary vulnerable. She will be forced to fend for herself. In first century Palestine, to be a poor, young, single mom with no support might prove to be a death sentence for herself and her child.

Joseph had a plan for how his life would unfold – he would marry the woman of his dreams, they move into a starter home, and then as their family grew they would find something with a little more room. That was Joseph's plan. It was a good plan. It was a sane plan. And it was a safe plan. But then Mary uttered a single sentence and Joseph's plan evaporated into the ether.

Can you relate to Joseph's dilemma? Have you had a plan for how your life would unfold and then something came along that derailed that plan? Maybe it was a divorce or a pregnancy or an inability to have children. It could have been an out-of-control child or a terrible pathology report or a tragic accident. Perhaps you know that feeling of having your life thrown into total disarray and, for a period of time, you have no clue as to the best way to respond.

Joseph's life was thrown into a tangled mess, so he decided to dismiss Mary quietly. Then something unexpected happened to Joseph. His soul could not rest peacefully with his decision. In the middle of the night he experienced a restless sleep. I wonder if in the quiet of night, it dawned on him to quit focusing so much on himself and how *his* life had been turned upside down and to consider how much worse it was for Mary.

Surely he had great difficulty falling asleep, but when he finally drifted off, he dreamt that a messenger from God spoke to him. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Do not be afraid to raise this child. But Joseph was afraid; afraid he could not handle the scandal that might erupt. Nazareth was a small village. Scholars believe everyone in Nazareth knew everyone else. What if Joseph had stuck with his original plan to dismiss Mary quietly?

It is a bit unnerving to think that God's idea to reveal the divine character through a human being was brimming with risk. God does not control us like puppets. We have the freedom to make choices. What if Joseph had shunned Mary? Or what if Joseph took Mary as his wife, but always resented Jesus? No doubt God had a plan B, but Jesus would have turned out differently.

The gospels mention Mary far more than Joseph so I have no doubt that she was the primary influence in his life. But it seems obvious that Joseph also made a very positive impression on Jesus. What proof do we have? When Jesus taught his followers the Lord's Prayer, he addressed God as Father, and he used the word "abba" which is a warm, affectionate word like "Dad" or "Daddy." Could it be that he had such a close bond with Joseph that it helped him to see God not as Judge or King or Ruler, but more like a loving father?

And when Jesus told the parable about the two sons where one took half of the inheritance and squandered it before dragging himself back home, where did he get the image of a father who doesn't punish his son and say,

“I told you so,” but rather at the first sight of his son in the distance, the father dashes down the road to swallow him in a bear hug? Was it the man who raised him and who was known as a righteous man?

In 2018, when a group from Westminster took a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine, the trip included a day in Nazareth. Our group was stunned to learn that we could actually enter the home of Joseph and Mary.

We stood in awe as the guide told us that historians and anthropologists had confirmed that the cave we entered was the back part of the house of the Holy family. Joseph’s tomb is a few feet away, known for 20 centuries as the burial spot of a righteous man.

When Mary first broke the news to Joseph, he was forced to make a troubling decision. But rather than take the easy way out, he chose the path that was more demanding – the path that required tenacity and perseverance – because he knew that being faithful is the right thing to do.

Janet Hunt remembers sitting in a waiting room outside of the intensive care unit. “Sixteen year old Nathan and his friend had gone to the mall – driving from their own small town into the city, Nathan had taken a shortcut he had seen his parents take. It was not late at night, the boys had not been drinking, and they had their seatbelts on. But the paved road turned to gravel sooner than he remembered and the car rolled. Nathan’s friend came away from the accident with a broken leg, but Nathan was in intensive care with a brain injury.”

Hunt “sat with Nathan’s father and stepmother, and when Nathan’s father stepped out for a minute, the stepmother told the back story. In the father’s first marriage, his wife was unfaithful. When Nathan was born, the husband did not know if this was really his biological son. Nevertheless, he claimed Nathan as his own; raised him as his own; loved him as his own. And when his first wife left them, he continued to love Nathan as his own. And now he kept vigil with his son as he clung to life. Nathan survived and his father would support him every day through years of therapy.”

“Like Joseph, when faced with a challenging situation, he did the right thing, and Nathan’s world was changed forever.”¹

All of us face moments of decision, both large and small. How we respond shapes the future. When faced with a difficult decision, may we not simply choose what is easy. May we weigh the alternatives, seek God’s guidance, and choose what is compassionate and faithful.

NOTES

1. Janet H. Hunt, “Just What a Dad Does,” *dancingwiththeword.com*, December 15, 2013.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Promise —

Through surprising messengers and unexpected messages, you lean close to whisper the good news: “I am with you.”

As we prepare to celebrate the Messiah’s birth, may we live as people who trust this good news, who know in our hearts that you are not only God-Above-Us, and God-Before-Us, but also God-With-Us … our Emmanuel. With eager longing, we await the birth of the babe who bears this name, and anticipate the gifts of peace, hope, joy, and love he brings.

God of Grace —

We have lit the Candle of Peace and pray for every conflicted home and every restless heart, for every land plagued by violence and every community that is conflict rent, and for our own nation as divisions deepen and trust erodes ...

We have lit the Candle of Hope and pray for those mired in despair, those who see no path toward healing or wholeness, those who cannot imagine a light strong enough to pierce the darkness or ‘alleluias’ glorious enough to illuminate the night ...

We have lit the Candle of Joy and pray for those who feel weary and worn, those who endure this season with heavy hearts because of empty chairs or empty cradles or empty arms, those who feel their lives have lost all sense of purpose ...

We have lit the Candle of Love and pray for all who need reminders of your care — for neighbors alone and lonely and neighborhoods neglected and dreary, for friends who feel forgotten and families stretched and scattered ...

God of Love —

Soon we will join the angel chorus in proclaiming good news of great joy, as you draw near to bring peace, hope, joy, and love to all people. Help us to receive your Son, and inspire us to work for a world in which hope empowers, peace reigns, joy takes deep root and love abounds. This we ask in the name of the One who comes, the One who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.