

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2022

ADVENT 4A

MATTHEW 1:18-25

TRADITIONAL

WHAT A PREDICAMENT JOSEPH FINDS HIMSELF IN. IT SEEMS LIKE THE ONLY CHOICES HE HAS ARE NEGATIVE ONES. DIVORCE HER PUBLICLY, DIVORCE HER QUIETLY, EITHER WAY, HE MUST DIVORCE HER. NO WAY OUT OF IT. NO POSSIBLE RESOLUTION THAT COULD LEAD TO A RESOLUTION. ONLY PAIN. IT HAD NOT OCCURRED TO HIM THAT MARY'S UNBELIEVABLE STORY MIGHT ACTUALLY BE GOD'S TRUTH. IT NEVER OCCURRED TO HIM THAT THE ONLY THING LACKING WAS FOR HIM TO EMBRACE THAT TRUTH, AND THE SITUATION WOULD BE TRANSFORMED AND CHANGE THE WORLD.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU FACE A SITUATION IN WHICH YOUR ONLY CHOICES APPEARS TO BE NEGATIVE? DO YOU AGONIZE? OVEREAT? TAKE IT OUT ON THOSE YOU LOVE? TRY TO GET SOMEONE ELSE TO MAKE UP YOUR MIND FOR YOU SO YOU CAN THEN BLAME THE OUTCOME ON THEM?

I FEEL FOR JOSEPH – WHEN FACED WITH SUCH A TERRIBLE DILEMMA, ALL HE COULD SEE WERE NEGATIVE OPTIONS. CAN'T YOU JUST IMAGINE WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH HIS HEAD?

I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE DID THIS TO ME. I'VE BEEN SITTING HERE ALL DAY, UNABLE TO WRAP MY HEAD AROUND THIS. I HAVE PRAYED. I HAVE CRIED. FOR ONE FLEETING MOMENT, I EVEN CONSIDERED THAT SHE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH, BUT THIS IS SIMPLY MORE THAN I CAN SWALLOW. WHAT MAN WOULD FALL FOR A STORY LIKE THIS? IT WOULD TEACH HER A LESSON IF I DIVORCED HER PUBLICLY. WHO COULD BLAME ME?

BUT I'M NOT A VENGEFUL MAN. I AM A MAN STRONG WITHIN MYSELF, NOT CONCERNED WITH OTHER'S OPINION OF ME. I HAVE NOTHING TO GAIN BY HUMILIATING HER. SO A QUIET DIVORCE IS THE WAY TO GO – I WILL NOT HUMILIATE HER BY ACCUSING HER OF ADULTERY. I TRY TO THINK THE BEST OF PEOPLE – BUT AM STRUGGLING WITH THIS. I FEEL BETRAYED. THEY SAY YOU SHOULD NEVER LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON YOUR ANGER, BUT THE SUN IS SETTING AND I AM FILLED WITH PAIN. I WILL GO TO BED AND HOPE FOR SLEEP, AND TOMORROW I WILL SEND A MESSAGE TO MARY LETTING HER KNOW OF MY DECISION TO QUIETLY DIVORCE HER.

WELL, WE KNOW THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN – ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS LOOK AT ANY NATIVITY SCENE – HE'S STILL THERE. SO WHAT HAPPENED?

OUR SCRIPTURE TELLS US – “JUST WHEN HE RESOLVED TO DO THIS, AN ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO HIM IN A DREAM...” IN HIS SLEEP, JOSEPH ALLOWED GOD TO SPEAK TO THE DEPTHS OF HIS HEART AND TO OFFER A RESOLUTION – ONE THAT IN HIS VERY HUMAN STATE OF DISTRESS HE FAILED TO SEE.

ON THIS NIGHT – AS MUCH AS ON THE NIGHT OF JESUS' BIRTH, AN ANGEL HOVERED NEAR, WHISPERING A MESSAGE FROM GOD INTO JOSEPH'S SLEEPING EAR. THE ANGEL INTERRUPTED THE NIGHTMARE OF ACCUSATIONS AND ESTRANGEMENT AND DIVORCE THAT JOSEPH TOOK TO BED WITH HIM, AND REPLACED THEM WITH A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ENDING.

“HERE” WHISPERED THE ANGEL, “IS THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS YOUR DILEMMA.” BELIEVE HER UNBELIEVABLE STORY. MARRY HER, AND BECOME THE FATHER OF GOD'S CHILD. HE WILL NEED AN EARTHLY FATHER IN ORDER TO BE ACCEPTED BY OTHERS AS HE GROWS TO MANHOOD. HE WILL NEED, NOT JUST ANY FATHER, BUT A FATHER LIKE YOU, CAPABLE OF NURTURING HIM, AND GIVING HIM A NAME. EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US.

HE WILL NEED A FATHER LIKE YOU TO TEACH HIM TO TAKE RISKS LIKE THE ONE YOU ARE ABOUT TO TAKE, FOR HE WILL BE TEMPTED NOT TO.

HE WILL NEED A FATHER LIKE YOU TO TEACH HIM TO WITHSTAND THE DISAPPROVAL OF OTHERS, AS YOU WILL SOON HAVE TO WITHSTAND THE SAME.

HE WILL NEED A FATHER LIKE YOU TO TEACH HIM WHAT TO DO IN SITUATIONS LIKE THIS ONE, WHEN ALL HOPE SEEMS LOST AND ONLY PAIN REMAINS; TO MODEL HOW TO BELIEVE THE UNBELIEVABLE GOOD NEWS AND TO WALK IN FAITH.

IF YOU DO NOT WALK THE HARD ROAD TO BETHLEHEM, WHO WILL TEACH HIM HOW TO CLIMB THE CRUEL HILL TO CALVARY?

IN THIS WAY, I IMAGINE THE FATHER OF JESUS WAS BORN THAT NIGHT.

AND JOSEPH WOKE FROM SLEEP AND DID AS THE ANGEL OF THE LORD COMMANDED HIM – HE TOOK MARY AS HIS WIFE AND JESUS AS HIS SON.

WE AREN'T USED TO THINKING ABOUT THIS SENSE OF BETRAYAL AND DISAPPOINTMENT THAT JOSEPH MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED, OR THE FEAR AND HURT THAT MARY WOULD HAVE FELT AS THEY SORTED OUT THEIR DIVINELY COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP.

BUT MARY AND JOSEPH AREN'T CHARACTERS FROM A NATIVITY CRECHE', BROUGHT OUT ONCE A YEAR FOR US TO PONDER THE BEAUTY AND WONDER OF JESUS BIRTH. THEY ARE FLESH AND BLOOD PEOPLE, WHO HAD UPS AND DOWNS IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP, WHO HAD NORMAL HUMAN STRUGGLES, NOT UNLIKE OUR OWN.

AND THE MORE WE CAN IMAGINE THEM AS PEOPLE **LIKE US**, WHERE LIFE ISN'T ALWAYS SUNSHINE AND ROSES, THEN PERHAPS THE MORE WE MIGHT IMAGINE OURSELVES TO BE PEOPLE **LIKE THEM!** – PEOPLE WHO GO THROUGH ALL KINDS OF THINGS AND YET WHOM GOD USES ANYWAY TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES.

IT TAKES A VISIT FROM AN ANGEL TO CALM ALL THIS DOWN AND ORIENT JOSEPH TO GOD'S INTENTIONS. AND AS ANGELS USUALLY GET INVOLVED IN THE BIBLICAL STORY ONLY WHEN HEAVY LIFTING IS INVOLVED, I IMAGINE THOSE MONTHS LEADING UP TO CHRIST'S BIRTH WERE NOT ONE JOYOUS BABY SHOWER AFTER ANOTHER, BUT WERE FILLED WITH ANXIETY AND CONCERN, AND A WHOLE HOST OF EMOTIONS WE HAVE ALL EXPERIENCED AT TIMES.

AN ISN'T THAT THE POINT -

THIS MORNING AS WE GATHER, THERE ARE THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE STRUGGLING TO HOLD IT ALL TOGETHER. THERE ARE FAMILIES IN DISCORD, COUPLES WHO FEEL DISCONNECTED, KIDS WONDERING WHAT THEIR FUTURE HOLDS, ELDERS WONDERING THE SAME THING FROM A DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINT. SOME SEEK JOBS, SOME SEEK RELATIONSHIPS AND SOME – ANY SENSE OF ACCEPTANCE OR WORTH.

THIS TEXT REMINDS US THAT GOD WORKS THROUGH REAL PEOPLE WITH REAL CHALLENGES. GOD DIDN'T CHOOSE A FAIRY TALE PRINCESS TO BE THE MOTHER OF THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD. HE CHOSE AN UNWED, TEENAGE, PEASANT GIRL. HE DIDN'T CHOOSE A SAVY POLITICIAN OR SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS MAN, BUT A MAN WITH HIS OWN DOUBTS AND QUESTIONS WHO WANTED TO DO THE RIGHT THING, BUT NEEDED HEAVENLY GUIDANCE IN THE FORM OF AN ANGEL TO ACCOMPLISH IT.

AND AS A RESULT, HIS PURPOSE FOR HIS LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS STAYS FOCUSED ON MAINTAINING HIS RIGHTEOUS STANDING BEFORE THE LORD BY HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW. AND THIS OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW ISN'T LEGALISTIC – YES, HE'S CONCERNED ABOUT HIS OWN OBEDIENCE, BUT ALSO ABOUT SHOWING COMPASSION FOR MARY AND HAVING REGARD FOR HER WELL BEING.

HE DOESN'T ABANDON HIS FAITHFULNESS TO THE LAW IN ORDER TO CARE FOR MARY, NOR DOES HE ABANDON MARY WHEN HER CONDITION PRESENTS HIM WITH A DILEMMA ABOUT HIS OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS. WHAT HE ATTEMPTS TO DO IS BALANCE OBEDIENCE AND COMPASSION.

SO, HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE MESSAGE OF THE ANGEL OF THE LORD OVERRULES HIS OWN SUSPICIONS OF MARY'S FAITHLESSNESS, AS WELL AS FEAR FOR THE RUIN OF HIS OWN REPUTATION AND HONOR. I IMAGINE HIS EMOTIONAL STATE AT THE TIME OF THE ANGEL'S VISIT MUST HAVE BEEN EXTREMELY CONFLICTED. BUT THE ANGEL GIVES HIM GUIDANCE AND STABILITY TO PLAY HIS PART IN CARRYING OUT GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION, EVEN IF IT MEANT RIDICULE AND FALSE ACCUSATIONS OF MORAL FAILURE.

MATTHEW DOESN'T TRY TO CONVINCING US IN THE TELLING OF THIS STORY OF THE TRUTHFULNESS OF ITS ACCOUNT, RATHER, HE ASSUMES IT, AND EXPECTS US TO DO THE SAME. THE MIRACLE WAS SO WELL KNOWN IN HIS COMMUNITY THAT HE ONLY NEEDED TO STATE IT. AND WHILE YOU AND I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO FULLY COMPREHEND THE DEPTH OF THE MIRACULOUS INCARNATION, THIS GOSPEL FROM ITS VERY BEGINNING RIGHT THROUGH TO THE END REQUIRES US TO DEAL WITH "EMMANUEL", WHOM MATTHEW DRAWS FROM ISAIAH TO APPLY TO JESUS. EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US. GOD REALLY WITH US.

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 EXACTLY AS WE ARE – TODAY – IN THIS MOMENT.

YOU SEE, JESUS IS NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO NEEDS AN EXAMPLE LIKE JOSEPH. WE ALL STRUGGLE AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER WITH TOUGH SITUATIONS. WE ALL YEARN FOR ASSURANCE FROM THE ONE WHO KNOWS FROM EXPERIENCE, THAT GOD'S UNBELIEVABLE GOOD NEWS IS TRUE.

AS WE PONDER THE STORY OF JOSEPH, WE WOULD DO WELL TO TUNE OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AND EARS TO GOD'S DESIRE TO WORK IN AND THROUGH US AS HE DID THROUGH JOSEPH.

AS THE HYMN SAYS:

THE HOPES AND FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS ARE MET IN THEE TONIGHT.

BRING YOUR HOPES AND FEARS TO THE ALTAR. BECAUSE THAT'S THE PROMISE AT THE HEART OF TODAY'S LESSON THAT AS GOD CAME BEFORE TO BE WITH US, TO USE, ACCEPT AND HALLOW JOSEPH AND MARY AT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST, SO TOO DOES HE COME TO US IN CHRIST, TO BE WITH US, TO USE US FOR GOOD, TO ACCEPT US AS WE ARE AND TO HALLOW US BY GOD'S OWN PRESENCE. GOD IS WITH US – REALLY AND TRULY AS WE ARE. AMEN