

## 12-24-17 Sermon – “He Is Coming...But Who?” Matthew 1:18-25

Well friends, today’s the day! Today is two days, in fact: It’s the final Sunday in Advent *and* it’s Christmas Eve! For the last month, we have been watching and waiting and preparing for our Lord to arrive. And tonight, at long last, we will proclaim, “Christ has come.”

Last week we spent some time with Mary, and we heard her response to the news that she would give birth to the Savior. And so today, we turn to see what happens with Joseph.

Some people have called Joseph the most ‘underrated’ character in the Christmas story. He’s certainly not in the spotlight – he plays more of a ‘supporting role.’ As the story goes, he’s not even really a necessary character, at least biologically speaking. I always picture him just kind of standing there in the stable, somewhat awkwardly, trying to be helpful while Mary gives birth to someone else’s baby!

But at the end of the day, Joseph *is* there; he *is* part of the story. And I’m glad that Joseph makes the cut, because I think God has something important to teach us through Joseph. Something about who Jesus is, and who we are, and what it means to be disciples of this child who will be called Emmanuel, God-with-us.

When we turn to this morning’s Gospel reading, we see that Matthew is rather sparse with details. We learn two things about Joseph: (1) He is engaged to Mary, and (2) He is a righteous man.

Joseph is engaged to Mary, and of course, Mary turns out to be pregnant with a baby that is not his. Matthew tells us, the readers, that this child is from the Holy Spirit, but Joseph doesn’t know that yet. And so, when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, he assumes what I think that any of us would: that his fiancé has been spending some time with someone else...in the Biblical sense. He assumes that Mary has been unfaithful, that she has committed adultery.

We also learn that Joseph is a righteous man, which means that he lives by the Torah, the Law that God gave to the people of Israel. And according to the Law, Joseph cannot marry someone who has been unfaithful to him. According to the Law, Joseph should dismiss Mary, possibly even have her put to death. But he is compassionate, and so instead of shaming Mary publicly or putting her life in danger, Joseph decides to call off the engagement privately. But he *must* call it off, because the Law says so. And Joseph, who is righteous, *must* follow the Law.

Now, we Christians tend to give the Law a bad rap. When we hear the word “Law” in the Bible, we immediately start thinking in terms of the Law *versus* grace. We see it as one or the other. But that’s not how the Hebrew people understood the Law – nor is it how Jewish people relate to the Law today. For them, it’s not a question of Law versus grace: for the Jewish people, the Law itself *is* God’s very grace!

For the Jewish people, the Law of Moses is a gift from God, not a list of burdensome commandments. For Joseph, this sacred Law is the opportunity to be in relationship with the God who loves him and calls him by name. It’s a drink of cool water for a parched soul, a beacon of light shining the way home.

Joseph is a righteous man who lives according to the Law. And so he knows he must send Mary away. Not just because he feels like he has to follow the rules, but because he doesn’t want to violate his very relationship with the God whose grace sustains him day by day.

And then, Joseph has a dream. The angel of the Lord appears to him, and tells him not to send Mary away, but to marry her and even to adopt this child Jesus as his own son!

Tell me, friends, what is a righteous person to do? Stick with the Law he knows, the commandments that Joseph understands to be the very Word of the Lord? Or follow this strange

new revelation? This new commandment that seems to directly contradict what he, until now, has always understood to be God's will?

We've been in Joseph's shoes before, haven't we? We want to do the right thing, to be faithful disciples. And so we look to the Bible as the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, and God's Word for us today. And yet we too, like Joseph, have found ourselves standing in that uncomfortable tension where what the Bible says seems to contradict what we believe – in our heart of hearts – is the truly Christian thing to do.

The Bible says, "Slaves, obey your masters." And yet a voice deep within our ancestors cried out, "No! No, slavery is *not* God's will for us, and it never has been. We cannot call ourselves Christians while at the same time claiming to own another human being."

The Bible says, "Anyone who divorces their spouse and marries another person commits adultery." And yet many of us have seen or been in marriages that are unhealthy, even dangerous. Marriages for which making the hard decision to get a divorce has led to healing, and new life, and an experience that can only be described as grace.

The Bible says, "You shall not lie with a man as if with a woman; it is an abomination." And then our son or daughter, our friend or sister, comes out to us and tells us that they are gay. And we know, deep within our hearts, that whatever it might say in Leviticus, this beloved child, friend, or sibling is not an abomination, but a *blessing* – a child of God perfectly created in God's own image.

Joseph wonders, "Could God really be asking me to violate the Law of Moses?" And we ask, "Could it possibly be that the 'Christian thing to do' sometimes contradicts what we read in the Bible?"

In the end, Joseph has to make a choice. And he chooses the harder, riskier option. He chooses to listen to the angel, to trust the Word from God that he heard in his dream. Joseph opens up his heart and mind and allows himself to be transformed by the *new thing* that God is doing in Jesus Christ. Later on in his ministry, this child named Jesus will teach his disciples that there are two commandments far greater, more urgent and essential than all the rest: Love God, and Love your neighbor. But long before all of that – before Jesus is even born – Joseph learns that when it comes to doing God's will, love has the final word. He learns that to choose love is to choose God himself.

The angel who appears to Joseph says, "This child will be called Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'." God *with* us: which means that God is does not live in some faraway heaven or even a sacred book, but that God lives and breathes and moves right here in our world. God *with* us: which means that we can see God in our own faces, and in the faces of our neighbors. God *with* us: which means that the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is a *living, active* God, who is not done with us yet. That God is still loving us, and teaching us, and shaping us into the people that God calls us to be. God *with* us: which means that the God who spoke the world into existence billions of years ago is still speaking, whispering to each of us today.

By opening himself up to love, Joseph is transformed – and so are we – into disciples of this living, active God-with-us. He learns that doing God's will and obeying God's commandments, does not mean, as Professor Tom Long puts it, "looking up a rule in a book and then doing the 'right thing.' Rather, it means wrestling with the complexities of real life, listening to the voice of God, and then doing *God's* thing."<sup>1</sup> It involves letting go of our preconceived notions of what it means to righteous – to be a good Christian – and opening ourselves up to the transformative power of love. It means allowing God to make us uncomfortable, to challenge our sense of security and our understanding of how God works, so

that God can do a new thing in our midst. And friends, God *is* doing a new thing, for the love of God that was born into the world as the tiny baby Jesus Christ, is *still* being born, again and again, into our world today.

He is coming, but who?

Friends, love is coming. The Love that has held us since the day we were born and will hold us long after we die. The love that brings sight to blind eyes, release to the captives, freedom to the oppressed, good news to the poor. The perfect love that casts out fear.

When this love comes how will we receive it? Will love find us clinging to our rules and fences, to our prescribed understandings of who God can love and what God's love looks like? Or will it find us with arms open, ready to welcome the new thing that God is doing, to greet our Lord who is Emmanuel, God with us?

Love is coming. Let's fling wide the doors and let love in.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 14.