

THE CRISIS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Micah 5:1-5a

Matthew 1:18-25

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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On this last Sunday in Advent our scripture spotlights the most under rated player in the Christmas story, Joseph of Nazareth. According to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus actually wasn't Joseph's son, but according to both Jewish tradition and law, adoption gave Jesus all the rights and privileges of a biological son. Therefore Joseph's ancestors automatically became Jesus' ancestors, making Jesus a bona fide descendant of the House of David, the reigning dynasty from King David down to King Zedeciah, who lost his throne when the Babylonians conquered Judea in 586 B.C., roughly six hundred years before Christ was born.

In the meantime David's descendants continued to live on despite their reduced circumstances, always aware of their bloodline and their deep spiritual connection to the family's hometown, Bethlehem.

We don't know why or when, but at some point, Joseph's family migrated north to the larger town of Nazareth in the province of Galilee. We also know next to nothing about Joseph's family, except for the names of his male ancestors given in the genealogy tracing his ancestry back to King David, and then further still back to Abraham.

It's this lack of information that on one level makes Matthew's narrative so frustrating. He tells his story with as few words as possible, which may be why Matthew is really a master storyteller. Leaving out the details and nuances we moderns are used to, Matthew forces us to speculate, read between the lines and fill in the blanks, which in a curious way draws us deeper into the story of God becoming one of us, a flesh and blood human being, stepping out from eternity and into the time and place where we live.

Here's what I mean. Matthew, brief and to the point, only tells us Joseph learned Mary was pregnant. Matthew doesn't say how and when Joseph found out so we can only speculate he heard it from one of her family members or even Mary herself. Nor are we told how Joseph took it, was he shocked, did he feel humiliated and betrayed? All we do know is what Matthew wrote, being a good man Joseph didn't go public and play the role of the wronged, jilted lover. Instead he decided to keep the scandal under wraps and divorce Mary quietly.

A modern day storyteller would dish out Joseph's angst and sense of betrayal, dismissing Mary's far fetched explanation out of hand, with accusations and name calling.

But Matthew doesn't do that, giving us the opportunity to put ourselves in Joseph's shoes and then test our own vicarious emotional reactions as the aggrieved party and compare it with Joseph's.

Keep in mind this situation is not about infidelity and betrayal, because Mary did nothing wrong. It's really about being able to believe the unbelievable and then trusting yourself to God's plan for your life.

Let's return to the story...after Joseph decided to quietly divorce Mary, did he have second thoughts? Remember Joseph took God and his promises seriously and like every other Jew believed God would keep his promise and send the Messiah. Believing that to be true, Joseph knew when the Messiah was born he'd need a mother and already knowing Mary would be the perfect mother, he had to ask himself, "Why not Mary?" And himself being a direct descendant of David, he had to wonder if he stayed with Mary and adopted her child wouldn't the prophecies be fulfilled?

These ruminations could've caused Joseph to have strange, other worldly dream bubbling up from his subconscious when he went to bed that night to a restless sleep

Joseph heard the angel say to put aside his doubts and fears. Take Mary as your wife. She told you the truth...

Here's where our invitation to speculate kicks in. Being a faithful Jew who not only knew of the prophecies but waited and prepared for the Messiah's coming, is it possible Joseph half believed Mary's story, but was spooked by the awesome responsibilities he'd shoulder being the father of the Messiah?

Wouldn't that scare you enough to back away? Being post modern people we've been taught to apply reason and the scientific method when making decisions about what's real and what's not, so our first impulse might be to question the validity of Mary and Joseph's story. After all, how often do angels visit us with messages from God? Who in his right mind would ever make a life-changing decision based on a dream? But I submit that wise and discerning people have experienced the mystery of God transcending science and reason allowing them to be open to the probability that God does communicate to us all the time, even if we're not listening.

Coming to that conclusion, Joseph was well aware that he'd be branded for being unhinged if he went public. Again speculation: Joseph probably said nothing to nobody about his dream except Mary, who already knew it was all true.

Now after encouraging you to prayerfully speculate and read between the lines of Matthew's short, concise narrative, doesn't this story you've heard hundreds of times start becoming more urgent and powerful to you personally? The story of Mary and Joseph stops being too familiar and sentimental, now they are seen as radical agents involved in God's plan to turn the world upside down and inside out, accessible and real, but especially dangerous and subversive to the new world order.

Going rogue, Mary and Joseph knew their future together would not always be safe and comfortable, and sometimes downright dangerous. So to stay faithful to their vocation to be the Messiah's parents, they needed to keep close to God, trusting each other and their son to his protection and grace. What they needed, and God gave them was a growing sense of God's presence plus the joy and affirmation that comes with it.

I once had a conversation with a young woman seriously considering adoption. On a road trip with her husband, she silently prayed, "Lord, give us a sign if you want us to adopt a baby." Minutes later she heard on the car radio, for the first time ever a public service announcement encouraging adoption. What's more, she heard the same announcement repeated three more times in the space of an hour.

She asked for a sign and got one. A bolt of lightning couldn't be more effective.

But then the doubts set in. Maybe this wasn't a message from God, just a coincidence. You know what I'm talking about, God hits you on the head, bombards you with signs, messages and affirmations, even so, we tell ourselves, "...maybe I'm reading too much into things." And so reason trumps faith and we stay the same.

My point: God always tries to get through to us, but we're either not listening or we don't want to hear. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, Joseph could've attributed his dream to an undigested piece of beef, divorce Mary and walk away. Likewise, Mary when faced with being a single parent could've gone for an abortion. If these things happened, there'd be no Christ Child and no salvation. Sounds drastic, but ask yourself, by not seeing God's signs or God's messages, has your life become less than it could be?

You see when you enter the Christmas story or better still allow the Holy Spirit to put yourself in Joseph's and Mary's shoes and wonder whether or not you'd accept similar responsibilities, life will never be the same again.

I believe that's part of the reason why Luke and Matthew included the Christmas story in their gospels. Certainly they wanted us to know how and why Christ was born, but also to challenge us to receive the greatest gift ever given and then become this generation of players in the story of Christ coming into the world again and again to guarantee the story will never end.