

“It Took Place in This Way”

Matthew 1:18-25

Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Each of the gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – begins the gospel story in a different way. Matthew begins with some shocking news, most shocking to Joseph, that the one to whom he is betrothed is pregnant, and he wasn't the father. As he was making plans to break off the engagement, he had a dream, and in the dream he was told from the lips of an angel that though he wasn't the father, neither was any other man. “Don't be afraid,” the angel said in his dream, “for the child in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Now this actually isn't the very beginning of Matthew's gospel. The part I didn't read from Matthew's first chapter, the first 17 verses, is a long list of “begats” from father to son, from Joseph all the way back to Father Abraham. It traces the royal pedigree of Joseph, but then Matthew plays a trick on us, saying that Joseph is not really the father of this new baby, the one we celebrate at Christmas.

Joseph was acting on an assumption any of us would make. We know how things work. I can imagine Joseph, having found out about Mary's pregnancy, confiding to a close friend, perhaps saying how much he loved her and didn't want to hurt her, and the friend saying, “For God's sake, Joseph, will you wake up and smell the coffee!” But the angel came and spoke to Joseph in a dream, not when he was awake and in control, but at night, when he was relaxed and his guard was down. Maybe that's the first thing we ought to notice as we move in these last days to Christmas – that the expectation of Jesus is outside all of our normal categories, and certainly beyond our control – beyond all our calculations. The baby is a wonder and a gift that moves us beyond ourselves, just as it moved Joseph beyond himself. Joseph “resolved to dismiss her quietly,” Matthew tells us

- the right thing to do at the time, even the righteous thing, as he did not want to place her in public danger. But God resolved to do something else entirely.

In our normal way of calculating and understanding things, the ways we think and judge when we are awake and alert to what is going on around us, we see that there is a scandal here, especially as it would have been calculated in that time and place. The baby has no father. But the point that Matthew is making is that the baby is from the Holy Spirit – the creating, loving, empowering presence of God, which makes all things new. The whole of scripture, it might be said, is a reflection on how God’s Spirit makes things new. It is God’s Spirit that at the beginning created the heavens and the earth. It is God’s Spirit, God’s breath/wind (same word) that blows back the water so that our ancestors may escape from slavery in the land of Egypt. It is God’s Spirit that calls the prophets and apostles and martyrs to go against the tide of the world’s assumptions and calculations, testifying to what God is doing in the world. It is God’s Spirit that came upon the disciples in the book of Acts and created a community of obedience and mission. And now, in this day, it is God’s Spirit that begins something new when the world is exhausted, when our imagination fails, when our lives are shut down in despair. This is what Matthew is telling us, that God’s Spirit has stirred and caused something utterly new in the world – caused this new baby who will change everything among us.

The angel actually gives two names for the baby. Names are very important in the ancient world. First, the angel says, “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people.” Jesus is the Hebrew word for save. Many babies in the Old Testament are named Save – it’s the root word for Joshua, Isaiah, Hosea – each of them saved Israel in their time, and now Jesus will save. He will save from sin and guilt, from death and destruction, from despair and hopelessness, from poverty, sickness and hunger. Advent is getting ready for the saving one who will come when we cannot save ourselves.

Maybe, maybe we can save ourselves from disaster by taking all precautions to stay safe. Maybe we can save ourselves from sickness by avoiding germs and by eating right and getting enough rest and exercise. Maybe we can save ourselves from loneliness by searching out friends. But, do we really need a savior? This is the question that the Christmas season invites us to ask. Have we truly managed to save ourselves? That's a big question, and it begs other questions: What does a savior save us from? What does a savior save us for?

This is not language, and these aren't questions, that sit very comfortably with our post-modern sophistication. They seem quaint, even primitive. We don't like to think of ourselves as being held captive by anything that we can't, with enough knowledge or resources, free ourselves from. Do we really need saving? There's a lot of negative baggage associated with that word, that question, for many of us. Some have been beaten up by it – judged and alienated from the community of faith. Some have been turned off by what somebody has called “the intolerable flippancy of the saved.” Others would reject the language because it would imply that we aren't capable of reaching or realizing God or “God consciousness” with the right spiritual tools or techniques. There are all kinds of reasons and ways to avoid the whole idea.

But this is a big story for Christians, the birth of this one “who will save his people from their sins” – meaning that his people cannot save themselves from their sins. And here is this little child – by our calculations the most vulnerable and helpless and needing of care and protection of all God's creatures – the one who does the saving. It doesn't compute, in a computing sort of way. But on the other hand, think of the power these little creatures hold over us, how they captivate us, how they make us lose all our inhibitions and take us out of ourselves, and cause us to do all kinds of strange behaviors!

Sin is serious stuff. And if we think we are exempt from its power and its hold on

us, then, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “we deceive ourselves and are strangers to the truth.” Asking the right questions, the real questions, will usually get us to the truth. And that puts us into some risky territory because they will usually demand that we change. A recovering drug addict told the story about the day he began his road to recovery. He had locked himself in a hotel room to take care of his \$600 a day habit as usual. This time he finally realized that whenever he turned to chemicals to achieve a sense of happiness, he went off to be alone. He isolated himself from others.

That’s a powerful image of what sin looks like in our own lives. Sin is the choice to minister to ourselves, rather than to allow the savior to minister to us – and often we’ll remove ourselves from others, from the community, go it alone, finding no support, no encouragement to seek divine help. We choose to minister to ourselves, to save ourselves, in all kinds of ways, but yet God does not condemn us. Instead God comes to us in his holy and compassionate love, entering a broken world in the most vulnerable way conceivable, subject to those same forces that we are subject to. That’s the second name the angel gives to the child, Emmanuel, God is with us. And God is with us in this way, coming into the world as we all come into the world, living in the world as we all live in the world – making all things new.

I am reminded of an image from one of those doctor shows on TV, and I pray that this has happened in real life. A baby, not yet come to full term, was diagnosed with a heart defect, and it was determined that in utero surgery was required to save the child. The surgeon opened up the mother and got to the baby – and as he was working so intently, so carefully, a little hand took hold of his finger – and by the look in the surgeon’s eyes, you knew he would never be the same. So intent do we become on our own lives and efforts to fix and control and be in charge – to save ourselves, to manage our own salvation – and here in the midst of it, in the bleak mid-winter of our souls, the God of all creation reaches

out to us in a baby's gentle grasp, and we are made new.

We see in the New Testament that wherever Jesus came, he showed up where people were in need, and he saved them – the blind, the deaf, the unclean, even the dead. His very presence makes new life possible, and the church exists in all the people who have been awed by the reality of God who has come to us in this season of need and of joy, all through this miraculous baby. What is the true miracle here? Is it the means of his conception – or is it the news that Christ is born? Is the true miracle believing in spite of all we know to be true – or, is it that like Joseph, like Mary, even we might say “Yes” to the newness that comes because God's Spirit stirs among us?

Matthew takes us right to the edge of Christmas. He gives us an angel's message in a dream that is beyond our control, beyond our expectation. He tells us that it is God's Spirit who makes all things new through this baby, and he names the baby twice. The angel names the baby Save, and Jesus saves us from all that kills and is flat and sad. He names the baby God is with us, and we are not alone. The story asks us to do nothing, only (Walter Brueggemann) invites us to be “dazzled.” And it invites us to ponder, as Mary pondered in her heart, as Joseph pondered, that while our world feels unsaveable, here is the baby named Save; that while our world and our lives often feel abandoned, here is the baby named God with us. So we are ready to have our lives and our world contradicted, once again, by this gift from God. We may rest our lives upon the new promise from the angel, and we may be safe and we may be whole and made generous, because Christmas is coming soon.