

Advent IV December 18, 2016

Joseph

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,  
Gracia y paz de dios del Padre, Hijo, y Espiritu Santo  
Grace to you and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What do you think when you hear the title “step-father”?

My son is a step-father

My husband is a step-father

My father-in-law is a step-father

There was a time in our collective memory when that was considered scandalous.

Maybe it still is to some.

A man marries a woman who has a child.

Where is the biological father of the child?

Was she ever married?

Was she divorced?

Was she widowed?

Does it matter?

It mattered A LOT to Joseph, Mary’s fiancé.

Betrothal was a big deal in this community.

Parents promised their young daughter, about 12 years old  
to the not much older son of another family.

It was a formal contract between the two households and it included the promise of land,  
animals, wealth or position.

The wedding ceremony took place about a year later.

In the meantime, the couple was considered husband and wife even though they did not live together.

If the betrothal was broken in any way, the couple divorced.

Divorce was shameful, especially for the woman.

So, when Joseph finds out Mary is pregnant . . .

and he KNOWS he's not the father,  
he is faced with two unpleasant choices.

One, he can publicly shame Mary by disclosing her infidelity and divorcing her.

The typical choice for a man who has been wronged.

Or he can divorce her quietly and move on,

not giving another thought to her future well-being.

She is no longer his problem.

Joseph decides to quietly write her a bill of divorce and

not drag her through a public trial to determine  
whether she had been raped or seduced.

She could be stoned for either.

Joseph knows the Torah and he is bound by Jewish law to "do the right thing".

But, God offers a third option that Joseph could not have thought of.

The angel of the Lord shows up in Joseph's dream.

When angels show up, crazy stuff happens.

It was the angel Gabriel who started this whole thing by coming to Mary and telling her she was going to have a baby.

It was the angel of the Lord who came to Elizabeth to announce her pregnancy.

It was angels of the Lord who came to Sarai and Abram in the desert.

When angels show up, crazy stuff happens.

But I digress. Back to Joseph and Mary.

The angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife, now, just don't consummate the marriage.

Oh, and name the baby Jesus.

The Evangelist, Matthew gives us a brief, some would say unsatisfactory telling of Jesus birth.

We have become so accustomed to the lovely, lengthy narrative in the gospel of Luke that we will hear on Christmas Eve that this one leaves us hungry for more detail.

The details that are important to this gospel writer are in the first 17 verses.

Here is the beginning of the story, according to Matthew:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob,  
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

Just kidding...we won't read the entire genealogy.

But do take a few minutes on your own and read through this list of names.

They are names you will recognize, at least some of them.

For example: Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

The prophet Isaiah tells of a "shoot that shall come out of the stem of Jesse".

We sing of that shoot in the Christmas carol

"Lo, How a rose is blooming, of Jesse's stem has come".

The genealogy goes on:

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

Soon after King David's reign, the Israelites were exiled to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon there are 13 more generations listed, ending with these:

Matthan the father of Jacob,

and Jacob the father of Joseph,

the husband of Mary,

and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Matthew concludes this long list with these words:

"Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David,

fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon,

and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah."

I can see your eyes glazing over.

Stay with me, this will make sense. I promise.

In a few minutes we will, together profess our faith in the Triune God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We will say out loud, to each other

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son

conceived by the Holy Spirit

born of the Virgin Mary".

On festival days we use the longer confession of faith

. . . the Nicene Creed

in which we profess to believe that Jesus is truly human and truly divine.

We can claim this with confidence because it is what the holy scripture attests to  
in Matthew's family tree of Jesus.

Jesus is truly human, fully human.  
Born just like you and I were...a baby.  
Helpless, unable to walk or talk or feed himself.  
Dependent on his human mother and  
the man who was chosen to be his step-father.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.  
It was messy, scandalous, dangerous and real.  
Joseph nearly abandoned the young, pregnant woman.

Confronted with a series of difficult personal and moral decisions,  
Joseph places his own honor and safety at risk.

He demonstrates for us what it means to be truly righteous  
by his attentiveness to God's will and his compassion for Mary.  
And Joseph named the child as instructed by the angel.  
Joseph, the divinely chosen step-father names the child Jesus.  
An important milestone in this ancient community.  
The child is thus recognized as legitimate.  
The child's family tree is established.  
Because the family tree identifies Joseph as the descendant of David,  
The yet-to-be-born Jesus is confirmed as the long expected Messiah,  
the one who will inherit the throne of David.

The ONE for whom the Jews have waited.  
The one who will save the people from their sins.  
We, too are God's people. This birth is important to us, also.  
Because of the life, death and resurrection of the living Christ,  
born a human who remains divine,  
our salvation has been assured,  
and is still taking place, here and now,

Thanks be to God.