

The Story that Changed Everything

Matthew 1:18-25

You know the Christmas story. Churches tell it every year in song and pageant. We'll be telling it again this evening in a Living Nativity outside on the church lawn with live animals, actors and a choir. It is a wonderfully moving story. There is the drama of Mary and Joseph and the innocence of a baby. There is the simplicity of shepherds and stable animals as well as the pageantry of kings, the majesty of angels and the darkness of King Herod.

You also know that the story is a compilation of two stories. One is from Matthew and one from Luke. Sometimes we include some of John's prologue and words from the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah. These stories differ on many key details and they don't exactly fit together, but that's okay. It works to remind us why we celebrate Christmas: to mark the beginning of Jesus' life and the beginning of our faith tradition following Jesus.

Matthew's version of Christmas story tends to be very understated, almost matter-of-fact in the telling. It is easy to overlook that Mary and Joseph were already living in Bethlehem, that the census and journey to Bethlehem from Nazareth were part of Luke's story. Joseph evidently had a house in Bethlehem and that is where they young family lived until they fled to Egypt.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed, promised in marriage, but not yet married. It would have been a great scandal when Mary became pregnant without actually being married. Joseph's faith in her was certainly broken, but his innate sense of right and wrong, his sense of compassion, led him to decide to end the contract quietly. He knew he wasn't the father. He also realized that, once the betrothal was annulled, Mary's life would be effectively over. She would become a mother outside marriage.

But then Joseph had a dream, much like his namesake, Joseph of ancient times who trusted his dreams, this Joseph had faith in his dreams. In his dream, an angel came to him and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1: 20b-21)

And Joseph did what angel in his dream said to do. He took Mary as his wife.

The question birth of virgin birth of Jesus is a theological one, not an historical one. It reflects Matthew's interpretation of a passage from Isaiah 7, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman (virgin) is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." (Is. 7:14) Immanent with you is El (God) -- God with us. In the original Hebrew of Isaiah, the word used was *halmah* meaning young woman or maiden. The Hebrew word *bethulah* specifically means *virgin*. *Parthenos* is the Septuagint word.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (*Septuagint*) that Matthew would have used, the one word *parthenos* would have been used to translate both Hebrew words. Matthew read this and took it as pointing both to Jesus and a virgin birth. In his gospel, Matthew proclaimed Jesus the Son of God—both human and divine—son of Mary and of the Holy Spirit. Matthew even carried his theological point further, that Joseph "had no marital relations with her until she had born [Jesus]."

The story of Jesus' virgin birth came relatively late into the Christian tradition. It was not present in Paul's writings nor in Mark's gospel. Even the birth narratives at all only came into Christian tradition some fifty years after Jesus' death on the cross. They are present not to indicate

historical detail, but to proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus as the Messiah, God's anointed one. They proclaim Jesus as the crown prince of God's Kingdom against the might of Caesar's kingdom. Please don't get caught up in either defending or decrying the virgin birth. Either way, you'd be missing the point. This is a faith narrative. In Jesus, God is with us—Emmanuel. Later in the Gospels, the Spirit in Jesus—the Holy Spirit—was given to disciples. Emmanuel—God with us--not just in Jesus, but this Spirit is in all of us as well.

The Christmas story is beloved, but unless it means more than a nice story presented as a pageant once a year to help us feel warm and fuzzy, then there is no point to Christmas. This is the story that changed everything: not by marking the beginning of the institutional Christian Church, but by placing the values of God right out there clearly for the whole world to see. Christmas is not the coming of a baby, but the in-breaking into stark and clear relief the presence, the reign, the kingdom of God among us. God is with us, but even more, God is within us. God's kingdom is within us and through us with its values and perspective, with its call for us to live by doing justice, making peace, and acting with compassion. The call of God for us is to embrace the high priorities of loving justice, being at peace and accepting compassion for ourselves as well, in our own lives. Christmas is the challenge for us to live that way.

This Advent season, we have studied and been inspired by the culture of India, in particular, by its spirituality that has so influenced world. Hinduism gave rise to Buddhism with its deep culture of peace making. We have learned how Jesus' teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, inspired Gandhi in terms of non-violent active resistance to oppression. That in turn inspired our own Martin Luther King, Jr. whose example still challenges us today.

We stand here more than 20 centuries after that first Christmas, after the birth of Jesus, still longing to see the fulfillment of the angels' promise--peace on earth! It is tempting for us to cast our hearts to heaven and ask,

How long, O God? "How long will it take for peace to come?

How long will it be until we see an end to war and a beginning of mutual respect?

How long until we know justice for all the world's people?"

How long, O God, until we know the joy of freedom?

And Christmas is God's answer -- Now is the time. God is with us. God is in us and we are here to work for peace, for justice, for liberation in our lives and for liberation in the world. We live now to embody peace and justice and liberation. We are here to be the change we want to see in ourselves and in our world: for peace, for justice, for freedom.

This Advent season again reminds us that it's not primarily the coming of a baby we celebrate at Christmas or even the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the coming into clear focus of *The Kingdom of God* with its clear values that so challenge those of the world. This is the story that changes everything, a story whose last chapter has not yet been written because you and I are still here. The world still largely walks in darkness and so desperately seeks the light.