

“The Obedience of Joseph”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 18, 2016
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Readings from Scripture: Romans 1:1-7 and Matthew 1:18-25

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:1-7

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream 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.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Matthew 1:18-25

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that we carry within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from holy scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and

transform all of these words into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord, and let that word do its work in our hearts, in our minds, and in our lives, guiding us, challenging us, encouraging us and comforting us as we seek to be faithful in this world in which we live. We ask this in Christ's name, Amen.

So I'm going to let you in on a little secret that not too many people know about. Upstairs in the office complex is the Department of Advent Complaints. It is the place that all the emails and conversations and comments and innuendos go to, because people in church are frustrated that we can't sing a Christmas song during Advent. We've gotta sing Emmanuel, Emmanuel, Emmanuel, instead of singing "Joy to the World." It used to be that these complaints would sometimes get under my skin a little bit, but this year I've decided that they are not going to do that. In fact, I'm going to let them propel me into the holiday spirit—a spirit of having our hopes and dreams kind of dashed and emptied and dumped out for a moment. Now if you think I'm kidding, please know that at 9:15 today I received an email in response to the all-clear message I sent out on Constant Contact early this morning that said simply, "Home, listening to Christmas music." It's okay, that person is not here.

Think about it for a minute. Okay, we want to get into the spirit, we want to get there—but what I realized is that in the midst of all of the concerns or frustrations that we may have, including not being able to sing joyfully "Joy to the World" yet, Joseph had a lot more reason to complain than any of us. A righteous Jewish young man is planning for his wedding to his beloved fiancée only to find out that she is with child. I've seen what frustrating response you can get from someone when they've talked about what their wedding dreams are going to be. Joseph, I'm sure, and Mary had thought it all out. The families were working together. There was going to be a huge celebration in honor of their coming together as husband and wife. I can only imagine the bubble of those expectations and joys popping when they find out that Mary is pregnant.

I can imagine this because I've watched the face of my daughter who is planning to get married next October, when she tells me that the florist is only going to cost \$2400, and I look across at her and I say, "Uh, no, it won't." "But Da-ad." And again, flowers, not your whole life. Not your whole sense of the way things are supposed to be. Joseph has all of his expectations taken from him. And instead of letting that destroy him, something else happens. Despite the calamity of Mary's pregnancy, the scripture tells us that Joseph wakes up. I've read this story so many times and I've thought, *okay, he's asleep and he wakes up. Or he gets a dream, a vision from God, and that wakes him up.* But for some reason this week I've been compelled to realize that this is an existential awakening for Joseph. It's not just that he wakes up or he wakes up after a dream, as vivid as it may have been. What happens to Joseph is something fundamental and it cracks him open to a new reality. A reality where he begins to see that God is doing something with him.

One of the commentators, in talking about this passage, says, that while we often translate Emmanuel as *God is with us*, a more literal translation would be *with us is God*. It may not be a huge change, but for me it packs significance to understand what Joseph woke up to that morning. He woke up to the reality that God's plan for salvation was dependent upon his faithful response. God's desire to bring salvation and wholeness to the world depended upon Joseph, a man whose dreams and expectations had been dashed, whose social standing had been ripped from under him, who wasn't sure which way to go or what to do. He woke up to a reality that, all of a sudden, with us is God—with him and with Mary, with all of us. God is present at work.

As I was thinking about this idea and wondering to myself, *how is it that we can become like Joseph? How is it that we could open ourselves and wake up to the power of God at work in our lives?*

How is it that we might, in our souls, create a manger for the Christ child as we wait for Christmas to come? As I was thinking about all of this, I received an email from my friend, Dale, who was part of my doctor of ministry program at Columbia Seminary, studying Christian spirituality. He affectionately addresses all of his emails to our little group of friends as, “to my beloved fellow mystics”. For some reason when he said the word “mystics”, I pulled my book of mystics off the shelf and it fell open to Meister Eckhart's day. Eckhart was a 13th century German Dominican theologian and preacher, who in the last year of his life was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, and he was summoned to Avignon to sit for trial before the Pope. The reason that he was in trouble was because he believed that the path to the Holy was a path of emptying and detachment. In a sense he believed that the path of the Holy in one's life was the path of Joseph, of someone whose expectations were taken away, whose understanding of the way life was supposed to be dashed. Eckhart writes that “only in the interior solitude of our souls will we create a space for our Savior to be born, and thus once again, to take on flesh.” Eckhart invites each of us to realize that like Joseph, whose expectations are taken and, like Mary, who doesn't quite understand what the Spirit is doing, the responsibility to birth forth the presence of Christ in our world is upon our shoulders, with us is God.

Another Saint, Angela of Foligno, was a rich woman, married with three sons who had an overwhelming experience of expectations being ripped from her. During the plague, her sons and her husband all lost their lives and she found herself alone. Unsure of what to do, she entered a Franciscan chapel and knelt before the crucifix and prayed to God, “What do you want me to do?” The message she heard was simple and profound and echoed of Francis's own message, “Empty yourself.” And so she got up and over the course of the next period of her life, sold all her property, gave everything away, engaged in ministry to the poor and had a following that began to come around her. Eckhart talks about solitude in our souls, and Angela invites us to think about emptying ourselves. Each, in a way, is picking up on an aspect of the story of Joseph that we can embrace.

As I was thinking about this idea of emptying ourselves and engaging a vow of poverty, I thought, *how would we ever do that? We who have so much or more than enough. How do we commit ourselves to poverty and service to the poor and not sell everything?* As I was holding that question, my eyes glanced back to the text and I saw that most sacred affirmation of the Good News, the one that the angels so often say. They said it to Mary, they are going to say it to the shepherds, but here they say it to Joseph the Son of David. Do not be afraid. As those words jumped into my imagination wondering how we might take a vow of poverty in today's world, I realized that each of us could take a vow to be poor in fear, that we could take a vow to be poor in worry, that we could take a vow to be poor in trepidation. If we truly believe that the message of Emmanuel is *with us is God*, it is fear and worry and trepidation that get in our way of carrying forward the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

So the invitation for us today is to be like the man named Joseph, who woke up, a righteous man now fully awake to the fact that God is at work in the world through his decisions and his actions, through his words and his deeds. The God of salvation and well-being for all people is depending upon Joseph to do the right thing in spite of every outward appearance in order for the savior of the world to be born. God is depending on us, too, to birth salvation and wholeness in our world. God is expecting and wanting us to empty ourselves and to take a vow of poverty against fear and worry and trepidation in order that we, too, might wake up and realize that with us is God. God wants us all to wake up, to hear the good news and to do what is right in order for salvation to continue to be at work in our world. And now the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, took place in this way. And now Advent draws to a close as the birth of Christmas begins in us all. Amen.