

Sermon: December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019- Advent 2- Sunday of Peace

Let us pray, ever present Lord, we have gathered in your grace and love this day to worship you and to celebrate this wonderful season of waiting and expectation. As your people we seek to connect with you in our prayers, hymns and lives; and I now offer you the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts, and ask that they may be acceptable to you our redeemer. Amen.

Every Advent season, we often hear one of the two readings that we heard today. We either hear about Joseph and his decision to quietly leave Mary upon hearing the news of her pregnancy and his eventual decision to remain by her side, or we hear the more familiar account of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and her courage filled response. We almost never, however, hear these two accounts read together, it often one or the other in any given year. But I wanted to have them both read today, because in this season of waiting and expectation, and particularly on this Advent Sunday of peace, I think both of them offer incredible examples of what it means to live faithfully in a time of expectation and unknowing; I believe it is a story how peace can indeed be lived out in an chaotic situation.

I know you don't all come to church for a history lesson, but history is really important to both of these accounts today. The problem with history though, is that our version of how things were, does not always line up with the reality; which leads me to feel like what I am about to say, though likely not new to you, does still challenge the joy and wonder of our image of the Christmas narrative; so I feel like I need to give you that heads up, but I would encourage you to not to zone me out, because the other things about the history is, that often the truth can be far more amazing than the image of the truth we have created.

From a historical standpoint, Mary's pregnancy is troubling at best. Mary as we know was engaged to be married to Joseph. From movies and paintings about this relationship, we often have an image in our minds that Mary and Joseph grew together in love. That there may have been romantic gestures and that they spent a lot of time walking around Nazareth and talking and learning about each other. We also like to paint a picture in our minds that they were roughly the same age. The truth however is quite different. In reality, this engagement, this relationship would have been arranged. Joseph would have been much older than Mary and it could have even be likely that the two of them had never even met. Needless to say, there was very little romance involved in their coming together. That's not to

say that their love could not grow over time, but in the beginning of their relationship it is more likely that they were more strangers than anything else.

Into this reality Mary is then visited by the Angel Gabriel, and her and Joseph's arranged marriage gets incredibly complicated with what Angels says. For Mary, whom we are told was a virgin, is now expecting a child; a child who is not biologically Josephs. Historically this could have ended very poorly for Mary, and that is an understatement. Our account from Matthew hints at how bad this situation could have been, for Joseph was within his rights and within the law, not to just leaver her but to publicly disgrace her; to shame not only her but her entire family. That shame would have led her family to be disgraced in the community. At its worst this news being made public could have led to Mary being put to death. Because no one, would believe the account of Mary's pregnancy that they could offer.

When we read the Advent and Christmas narratives, we often don't pay attention to details like this, or if we do we tend to gloss them over. But paying attention to the reality of this particular situation makes the story of Jesus birth and the two parents that stood by him all that more meaningful. Quite often we hear the phrase, "God works in mysterious ways." The story of Mary and Joseph is

one of those mysterious ways. It's mysterious because of how quickly it all could have ended, how different it could have been. It's powerful because from start to finish everything about Jesus birth is edged in chaos and yet from that chaos comes strength, hope and peace. I do not believe in a God that tests people, but the true miracle of this account, is not so much that Mary became pregnant, but more so how Joseph and Mary both respond.

Without question when Mary heard the words you will become pregnant, her heart must have sunk. She must have understood the very real consequences of that reality in her community. Yet even still she responds with an incredible strength. Not knowing how Joseph would respond, but knowing that he would be within his right to publicly disgrace her or that she may even be outcasted or put to death, she listened to the word of God, she feels the chaos of the situation and she responds by saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Joseph's response is equally as fascinating. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear that he has decided to dismiss her, which to us in the year 2019, sounds incredibly harsh. But for the time, he was doing something that would have been completely abnormal. The right thing to do according to the law was to publicly

name the indiscretion. He was expected to shame not only Mary, but her entire family, for their deception of him. But he chooses to take a different road, he chooses to quietly dismiss her, to walk away from the situation, but to not make the road ahead any harder than it needs to be.

Having made that decision he then, does what we all should when making a big decision in life, he sleeps on it, and while sleeping he has a dream, in which an Angel of the lord tells him the truth of Mary's pregnancy and encourages him to stay with her and when he awakes he does just that, he stays by her side.

Historically that is also an unheard-of response. Because to stay with Mary, could easily have opened him and his family to shame; and yet he stays. He remains close to her, by her side throughout the entire pregnancy, travel to Bethlehem birth and years afterwards.

Why I wanted to point out the historical accuracy of this account is that to do so points out just how miraculous it really is. Faithful people and un-faithful people alike tend to think that what is most miraculous about this account is God coming into the world through Jesus; and indeed, that is. But what is even more amazing, is that people, in this case two people, Mary and Joseph, refuse to let the "normal ways" of doing things guide their actions; instead they choose to

walk in the light of the Lord. They choose to walk across the daunting bridge that has been built in front of them. They choose peace in the face of the chaos circling.

A few weeks ago, now I described to you what real peace is. Many understand peace to be the absence of conflict, hardship or war. Motivational posters love to show us the incredibly peaceful locations around the world like the still pool next to a water fall and say things like, "Live in peace." But true peace, is doing what Joseph and Mary found the courage to do. Living into peace, is about not giving up in the face of hardship and instead amid that chaos and conflict knowing that there is a better way that our relationships with one another deserve a better response; recognizing that the other has value and worth and so acting with positivity and creating love founded on justice.

In this Advent season what we discover in our expectation, is that while we wait for the peace of God to be revealed in the picture perfect way of the nativity, the true peace of Christmas account comes in the courage to respond to God's call with grace, compassion, love and strength as we have seen in the ways that Mary and Joseph responded to the life changing, yet life giving, words of God. Each of them took seriously the call from God which asked them to help birth

God's presence in the world in a new way. And the peace that we experience in that account is that knowing amid all the chaos, amid the great challenge of the historical reality, and amid our own conflicts, challenges and chaotic lives, God finds a way to enter; but often what is needed in order to see is clearly, are people, like Joseph and Mary, who are willing to step against the normal way of doing things, to usher forth a light which shines in the darkness. May we as Advent people, spend the remaining weeks of this wonderful season looking for the ways that God is calling each of us, to do the same. May we be the bearers of peace, people who build relationships, who care for the others, people who refuse to let the normal ways of doing things, stop God's light from breaking through in unique and powerful ways. May we, like Mary and Joseph, respond in peace and Thanks be to God. Amen.