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Weekend of Sunday, December 22, 2019
4th Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16
Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7
Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:18-25
Sermon Title: “*Light of Love*”

Theme

Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth focuses on the role of Joseph, who adopts the divinely-begotten child into the family of David and obediently gives him the name Jesus, which means “God saves.”

Text

¹⁸Now 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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.”²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Sermon

This season of Advent, I chose to use the traditional Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love without regard for the prescribed readings for the day. When I did that I had no idea how it was going to turn out. But by this 4th Sunday of Advent, I can see the Holy Spirit at work in it.

For example, the theme of this 4th week of Advent is the "Light of Love." At first glance, I find that weirdly inappropriate and I will tell you why.

Each of the four Gospels has its own unique way of beginning, and what we have for our Gospel Reading today is Matthew's version. Only Matthew and Luke address the scandalous nature of the conception of God's Messiah, and only Matthew tells the story of Joseph's involvement in the story.

I say scandalous because, 1) God chose the young Virgin Mary who was already engaged to Joseph, to be the mother of God's Son, Jesus. Although, I suppose Mary could have said no to God's plan, she did not. Think about it, who would say no to the pronouncement of the archangel Gabriel? But what is clear is that it was not Mary's plan. For her to get pregnant before her marriage was, in that day, scandalous. And though no Gospel records it, I am certain Mary would have faced severe consequences and even death for her perceived indiscretion.

And 2) the second reason that the conception of God's Messiah is scandalous is because it also messed up Joseph's plans. What we know from Matthew's Gospel is that Joseph was "a righteous man" (:19). He was also likely a peasant and considerably older than Mary. The reason Bible scholars think that is because in the First Century it was customary to provide a dowry when becoming engaged. And so it undoubtedly took considerable time for Joseph to come up with the money or goods that it would take to acquire his bride. And furthermore, being a righteous man, Joseph, no doubt had plans too. And when he found out that his fiancée Mary was pregnant, well, the only logical conclusion he could draw was that she had been unfaithful.

It is simply scandalous that the LORD our God would disrupt the lives of righteous people, people who have found favor with the LORD in such an outrageous way.

And since this weekend's theme is "Light of Love" I asked myself, where is the love in the scandal of the conception and birth of Jesus Christ, God's Son and Messiah?

As a preacher, I was trained that if the Gospel isn't obviously present, it is still my job to bring it, even if I have to import it. That axiom seems to apply here. If the *love* isn't obviously present, it is still my job to bring it, even if I have to import it.

Well, you might be surprised to know that I see love throughout this passage.

In Luke 1, we have the story of the visit of the archangel Gabriel to Mary telling her that she has been selected by the LORD God to be the mother of the Son of the Most High. Mary asked a few questions but then in faith broke into the song we call the Magnificat in which Mary sings her praises to God for the honor that she has been given. Could Mary have done something to terminate the illegitimate pregnancy? Probably. But she didn't and that was because she felt the love of her LORD in the honor she had been given.

And in the Gospel Reading for today we hear how Joseph responded to Mary's condition. He could have accused her, outed her, subjected her to public humiliation and ultimately, stoning. But before he knew the truth of her conception, he "planned to dismiss her quietly" (:19). But when, the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream and explained it all, and likely told him that he was chosen to be the essential partner to Mary in the raising of God's Son, out of love for her and love for God, he acquiesced to God's plan.

Last Wednesday evening, while planning this sermon, I was reminded of a couple of contemporary songs that have been written about Joseph and Mary and their predicaments. So I went to that rabbit hole called YouTube and that took me from one song to another, namely,

- *"Strange Way to Save the World"* by 4Him;
- *"Joseph's Song"* by Michael Card
- *"Breath of Heaven"* by Amy Grant
- *"Be Born in Me"* by Francesca Battistelli
- *"Mary Did You Know"* by Mark Lowery
- *"Joseph's Lullaby"* by MercyMe

And there I was crying like a baby over a renewed appreciation of the love that made that Nativity possible. These contemporary songwriters and artists have obviously pondered this amazing love:

- God's love for Joseph and Mary;
- and God's love for all creation;
- the love Joseph and Mary had for each other;
- and their love for God;
- and whether Joseph and Mary knew it or not, their love for God's mission to save all creation.

And aren't we glad, for we certainly were not going to know salvation without Jesus, the Son they would raise as their own.

And so, though at first glance, "Light of Love" might seem like an inappropriate title for this weekend, I declare that the Gospel Reading could not be more full of love; love for me, and love for you. Love for those who acknowledge the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and love for those who deny God even exists.

So here we are at the end of our Advent journey, with hearts full of love. Love for God, love for Jesus Christ God's Son and Savior of the world, love for each other, and I hope, love for all creation including all other human beings. All of them may not love you back. You may not think some deserve your love, but that was never a condition for God's love, was it?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So, what the Holy Spirit asks of us this week, is that while we prepare for the great celebration of the birth of God's love, in the form of Jesus Christ our Lord that we ponder the "Light of Love," without which we would still be walking in darkness. But because we believe, we can walk in the "Light of Love".

Prayer

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant love, free us from the sin that hinders our ability to see and love others as you see and love us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen