

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

St. John's Youth Christmas Service/Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series A)

December 18, 2016

Text: Matthew 1:18–25

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

When reading Holy Scripture, one must always keep in mind that, most often, more is happening than seems to be happening. God is doing something greater and deeper and much more profound than what seems to be the case. The birth of Jesus must be read with this thought in mind: more is going on than appears to be going on (*thanks to P. H. Reardon for this insight*). Joseph had to learn that insight in a very profound and powerful way.

Matthew begins his retelling of Jesus' birth by describing some pretty ordinary things. Mary, a young girl, is betrothed to Joseph (vs. 18). Betrothals and marriages in 1st century Israel were significant events, to be sure, filled with joy and anticipation. But they were hardly considered to be world-changing occasions. Engagements and marriages today are significant events too. But we seldom attach to them eschatological, apocalyptic, end-times significance. Remember, however, that more is going on than appears to be going on.

Maybe it would be helpful to think a bit more about Joseph and Mary's betrothal. The Bible doesn't give us any details but it's quite likely that this marriage was arranged. That was pretty common in those days. It's not very romantic but romance for the sake of romance is a relatively new idea. Love would grow in time between the couple.

It's quite probable that Joseph was much older than Mary; Martin Luther speculates that she may have been as young as 14! Church tradition has long held that Joseph was much older than Mary. The last time we hear about him is when Jesus is 12 years old (Luke 2:41–52). After that, not a single word. In all likelihood, Joseph died before Jesus began His public ministry at about 30 years old.

A betrothal in 1st century Israel was a legally binding commitment between a man and woman intending to get married. In general, the betrothal was expected to last about one year. It's as if they were married but not quite. Typically, the couple lived

separately while preparing for the public wedding ceremony and their future life together. Sexual consummation came only after the marriage was publicly solemnized. But you just couldn't call off the betrothal on a whim. It required a formal, legal divorce to stop the betrothal.

An older man betrothed to a young, teenage maiden, probably arranged with little or no thought about romantic love. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." Not very nostalgic. Remember, more is going here than appears to be going on. The Lord God of heaven and earth is doing something that will cause wonder in heaven and earth!

Everything in the betrothal was moving along according to plan when Mary "was found to be with child" (vs. 18). Presumably, Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy. Can you imagine that conversation? Joseph, I'm pregnant but it's not what you think. The angel Gabriel told me that the Child in my womb is conceived of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel said my Son will be great and called the Son of the Most High. And of His kingdom there will be no end. I asked him how this was possible because I'm still a virgin. That's when He said the Holy Spirit would overshadow me and I would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, I'm pregnant. But I'm still a virgin; I haven't been unfaithful to you or God's commandment.

Matthew doesn't record the details. He simply states that "before they came together she (i.e., Mary) was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (vs. 18). Joseph doesn't believe Mary. Can you really blame Him? Virgins don't get pregnant; not then, not now, not ever.

Joseph is caught in a tough situation. It's obvious that his young betrothed has succumbed to passion and has been sexually unfaithful. Joseph is a "just man" and is "unwilling to put her to shame" (vs. 19). He could have had her publicly humiliated, exposed her sin for all to scorn her the rest of her days. Instead, he wants to do things privately, to "divorce her quietly" (vs. 19). Remember, the betrothal was a legally binding, public arrangement. To stop it, required a divorce; a legal cancellation of their intention to marry. It seems Joseph wants to get out of the way so that Mary and her lover can get married and get on with their lives. He's a just man. And he's considered these things carefully (vs. 20). But more is happening than he realizes.

Joseph has his own visitation. An angel appears to him in a dream and says "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her

is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Notice a few things here. First, don’t call off the wedding. Take Mary as your lawful bride. Second, she told him the truth; her Son is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by sexual union with another man. Third, Joseph you are to be His stepfather. Fulfill that noble vocation beginning with giving Him His God-given name, Jesus. Fourth, Mary’s Son is to be so named because He will actually do what His name means; save His people from their sins. Jesus is the Savior of His people.

On the surface, everything looks pretty ordinary. A man and a woman betrothed. She becomes pregnant not by her betrothed. It’s a bad deal but hardly unique; this wouldn’t be the first time such a thing has happened. Except more is going on here than what appears to be going on. Both Joseph and Mary have received angelic visitations telling them that God is working out the salvation of the world through them. But the actual proof of all this must be grounded in Holy Scripture. Matthew (vs. 23) quotes Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us).” It’s quite true that virgins don’t get pregnant. Except this one time, and this one time only. Virgin Mary is pregnant. She will give birth to the Savior who will save his people from their sins.

Against all human reason, knowledge, and experience, Joseph believed and trusted God. For when he awoke from his angelic visitation, “he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus” (vs. 24–25). In other words, Joseph and Mary went about the task of doing what you fathers and mothers do every day: loving, raising, and caring for your children and family members in faith and obedience to God.

And do you not do these things in the faith and hope that more is happening in your children’s lives than what appears to be going on? Ordinary looking families living ordinary lives. But here’s the glorious difference...our Lord and Savior is at work in your lives accomplishing extraordinary things: forgiveness of sins, life, salvation, and all the blessings of God Himself bestowed graciously and freely upon your family in time and in eternity. More is happening in your family than what appears to be happening. God is at work for your eternal good and His glory in, with and through your family!

God’s eternal Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit to a betrothed virgin mother; God’s eternal Son was born in a family with a step-father and mother so that He could

be named Jesus and do what His name says: save His people from the death and fearful domination of sin. In that ordinary family, a human-divine Savior is raised, nurtured and loved. For this father and mother know by faith that more is going on with this Son than what appears to be going on. In the fullness of time, their Son, Jesus will save the world through His perfect life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection.

God's Word is at work in all these things. Please hear me correctly, when I say that this is a rather typical looking gathering of people. There's ritual and tradition. Most meetings have them whether we acknowledge them or not. But God is at work through them doing more than appears to be happening. The words that come to you this day are life giving. For one again, you are reminded that Jesus was born to be your Savior from sin. Once again, the Savior fulfills His name by declaring to you that He forgives all your sins and trespasses. They can never harm you; you are saved from them and brought into His tender care. *(Highlight the role of St. John's youth in proclaiming God's love and grace.)* As a pledge, Jesus gives you His cleansing and nourishing body and blood through the most ordinary kind of bread and wine. More is going on in the Lord's Supper than appears to be going on.

We're on the very cusp of our Christmas celebrations. Rejoice again in the glorious truth that God entered this world through an ordinary family to do the most extraordinary things for you, for your family, and for this world. This week we begin rejoicing anew. Angels visited Joseph and Mary. Jesus was born in that humble family and did what His name says: saves you and all His people so that you can live with Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. A very Merry Christmas to you all ...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.