

“Choose Love”

Today is the last Sunday in Advent. In just three days it will be Christmas morning, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Before then on Christmas Eve we will hear the story of Jesus’ birth according to Luke. That is the story with a trip to Bethlehem, no room at the inn, the manger, shepherds watching their flocks by night, an army of angels and so much more. Today we hear a different version of the birth story. This is the one that St. Matthew wrote for us.

Matthew was not interested in shepherds, mangers, and inns. Matthew is concerned about relationships: Jesus’ relationship to King David, his relationship to his parents, and the relationship between Mary and Joseph. In addition, Matthew is concerned about their relationship to the Holy Spirit, and how Joseph relates to the angel that appears in his dream.

In Matthew’s rendering of the birth narrative he first lets us know that Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married. In their society they have probably been betrothed since they were children. That is, their parents arranged for them to be married when they reached the appropriate age. What Matthew is eager for us to know is that while they are engaged they are not married and they do not live together. This is important because Matthew wants it to be clear to us that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus.

Then he goes on to tell us that despite their not being married or living together Mary is found to be “with child” (pregnant) by the Holy Spirit. There is no Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel; Mary is just all of a sudden pregnant.

Next we hear that Joseph finds out about Mary’s pregnancy and decides that the best thing to do is to “dismiss her”. But Joseph being a “righteous man” does not want to shame Mary in public, which would have been the custom of the day. Instead he decides to tell her that the engagement is off, because she must have been intimate with another man or she would not be pregnant.

While Matthew does not report an angel visiting Mary, he does report one visiting Joseph in a dream. The angel tells Joseph that Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit not because she was unfaithful. The angel also tells Joseph to keep Mary as his fiancé and get married to her. The angel even gives Joseph a name for the baby—Yeshua, “God saves,” or in Greek Jesus. I suppose Joseph could have gone off to his therapist

and had a number of sessions about the meaning of this dream, but since Sigmund Freud was not born for another nineteen hundred years, Joseph simply understands that what he was told was a message from God. Thus he marries Mary.

There are a lot of relationships at play here. What seems important to me is that if any one of the people in the narrative had not done as God asked, if any relationship was not genuine, we might not have Christmas as we know it. But Mary, despite no revelation from an angel trusted that her pregnancy was special and not something to be ashamed of. Joseph, although suspicious at first, trusted the angel as a messenger from God and did as he was asked to do in the dream. If they did not listen to God and to angels and cooperate with the Holy Spirit we do not know what would have happened.

But that is the way God works. God gives us choices. God lets us make up our own minds for ourselves. God does not force us to do anything we do not want to do even when God knows it is best for us. That is the way God loves us. God showed that special love with Mary and Joseph. God brought that special love to life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who came to teach us all about how much God loves us and also how much God wants us to love each other.

Joseph and Mary made decisions that their love for God and each other was more important than societal norms and taking the easy way. They showed us that listening to God in our hearts is how we can be the most joyful. It is not easy for us to do, nor was it easy for Mary and Joseph. They did the hard things, because their relationship with God was one of trust. Remember this when God asks hard or impractical things of you. You have a choice just as Mary and Joseph did. If you trust God and choose love who knows what might come of it? I am sure that Mary or Joseph had no idea what the consequences of their decision would be. They chose love and through that love gave us the gift of the first Christmas more than two thousand years ago.