

# Still Waiting – But Getting Closer

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18-25  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We have just heard Matthew's version of the story of the birth of Jesus. I bet you don't remember seeing that portrayed in a traditional Christmas pageant. No, we're much more familiar with Luke's birth narrative. The most noticeable difference, of course, is that an angel speaks to Joseph in a dream in Matthew, while the angel Gabriel speaks directly to Mary in Luke. It may be easy, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to dismiss Matthew's account as simply reflecting the patriarchy of his time by focusing on Joseph instead of Mary. But that would be shortsighted.

Rather, as progressives, first of all we know we don't have to get into a panic wondering which one of these birth narrative was the actual literal truth, if either. Instead, we've learned to approach each story with questions such as what was the point each gospel writer was trying to get across to his readers. The next task is to try to understand what that story can mean to us today. Let's try to do that with Matthew's version.

First, it's important to understand that Matthew was writing to a Christian community made up primarily of those who grew up in the Jewish faith, rather than converts from various forms of Gentile paganism. Matthew's goal, then, was to help them bridge the gap and understand the relationship and continuity between the old and the new, between the cherished traditions and commandments of their Jewish legacy and the new demands of Christian discipleship.

Matthew started by making the case that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah promised and prophesized in the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Therefore, in the very beginning of Matthew's first chapter, verses which most all Christians haven't read, and if they did, probably only once, he starts with a long genealogy. Going back to Abraham, Matthew traces a lineage through King David to "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (Matt 1:16).

**Now, how many of us have not asked, since Joseph isn't Jesus' biological father, how does that connect Jesus with King David, whom we're told the Messiah must connect? It is this dilemma that makes it necessary, in Matthew, for an angel to visit Joseph, not Mary.**

Having Joseph find out his wife is pregnant, and that he's not the father, makes him face the moral crisis of following the Jewish law by dismissing Mary, to whom he is engaged. It is then that Joseph comes to realize God is doing a new thing in and through this child that is about to be born. Joseph, in an act that defies traditional cultural norms, agrees to take Mary as his wife. We learn that **being righteous – as in, doing what God wants us to do – doesn't just mean looking up a rule in a book and then doing the 'right thing.'** Rather, sometimes it means wrestling with the complexities

**of a problem, listening for the voice of God, and then doing God's new thing.** We, too, then, are responsible for trying to discern what God is doing, and then joining with God to do God's work in the world. That's what this congregation did a couple of decades ago in exploring and then affirming its pursuit of full leadership rights for LGBTQ persons of faith in our denomination. And that's certainly one of the primary tasks of our ruling elders when we gather in our monthly session meetings.

Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, comments, "Righteousness entails humility, the willingness to set aside deeply held assumptions, the ability to abandon our own plans and step into God's disturbing, dizzying new thing, the strength to take a stand and make a choice that runs counter to common wisdom or cultural norms or even religious rules, the courage to imagine that God is at work even when we are reeling from the loss of what had been our hoped for future." This understanding of righteousness is what gave Joseph courage to act.

It is at this point in the story we learn Joseph is given instructions to name the child Jesus. And there you have it. **It is in and through the act of naming of the child that Joseph acknowledges, by Jewish law, the child as legally his. In the naming of the child, Jesus is grafted into the lineage of David. That's how Jesus officially becomes a descendant of King David. This was the point that Matthew needed to make.** And in the process, Joseph becomes an adoptive parent.

Having settled that, the story continues. The name assigned to the baby by "an angel of the Lord" is "Jesus," the equivalent of the OT name Joshua, meaning "God saves." Matthew makes this more specific when he writes, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Yet, it doesn't stop there. Matthew introduces us to the theme of incarnation, declaring that the child in question is not only Jesus, but also (to quote Isaiah 7:14), **Emmanuel, God is with us.** Matthew declares that God has come among us through this newborn named Jesus.

Backing up just a bit, careful readers will notice that Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 7:14 is not exact. Matthew identifies the woman who will bear a son as "**the virgin,**" whereas Isaiah simply calls her "**the young woman.**" This happens because Matthew decided to quote from what is called the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, in which Isaiah's Hebrew word for "young woman" has been translated as "virgin."

You know, in trying to not get too controversial this year during Advent, I'm simply not going to get into that discussion this morning – much to the joy of some of you, much to the chagrin of others. So let's see, I've tried to somewhat skirt the themes of the virgin birth, not address how God speaks through dreams, and not deal fully with the patriarchal focus on Joseph's role in all this. That ability to skirt controversy, my friends, only comes with years of intentional practice.

So, what point do I really want to make this morning? How about this. **The baby Jesus is coming into the world, and now we have to decide how we respond. What are the responsibilities we take on when we claim faith in the coming of the Christ child?** We can start by acknowledging the very human feelings surrounding the impending birth of any child. We have anxieties, expectations, and fears, especially if that child represents meeting God in the flesh. How does one prepare for that moment? But as we approach the close of this season of Advent, as the end of waiting comes into view, **we are prompted to think about what that birth will mean for us – to you and to this community of faith.**

Before closing, I'd like to return back to Joseph, who we rarely take much time to think about what he has done. For in fact, Joseph can become a model of courage for you and me. Given his moral and ethical dilemma of deciding between what the neighbors might say if he didn't follow the traditional cultural norms of his day, **Joseph had the courage to commit** – commit to his best understanding to what he believed God was calling and asking him to do. How, then, can we apply that to our own commitment.

**Joseph also had the courage to become a nurturer** – even though the child he was to raise was biologically not his own. How, then, are you and I being called to nurture others, even those not considered, "our own"?

Finally, **Joseph had the courage to love** – to love his spouse even in the midst of an unexplainable mystery, to love through the child who is none other but Love incarnate, indeed none other than "The God Who Saves Is With Us."

The source and wellspring of such courage to commit, to nurture, and to love is God's love, the love made flesh, the love that came to dwell with us. And though a few days from now the waiting for the birth of the baby Jesus will be over, we will still wait. We will wait for the fulfilling of time, when all will take courage, step up, and love – love in the ways God would have us love one another, through our words and actions, through the continued ushering in of the kin-dom of God into our midst.

Yes, we're still waiting, but we're getting closer.

Amen.

Resources:

Bruce Reyes-Chow, "Advent Series: Waiting Well" from *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C. Volume 2*, 2019.

Jill Duffield, "4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent" from *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 12-17-19.

SALT, Courageous Love: SALT'S Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Four 12-16-19