



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
18 December 2022
Homily
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

1:18 Now 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.

1:19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

1:20 But 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.

1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

It is a Christmas Eve many years ago when I was still a teenager. The rural Baptist Church of my youth has almost finished its candlelight communion service. We are at the final, pinnacle moment, when the lights are dimmed; the worshippers take turns lighting our small, handheld candles; and everyone solemnly sings verse after verse of Silent Night:

Silent night, holy night.
 All is calm, all is bright.
 Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.
 Holy infant so tender and mild,
 Sleep in heavenly peace,
 Sleep in heavenly peace

Feelings of awe, reverence and mystery swell through the congregation, even in my young heart. And then, a brilliant faux pas:

As the last note rings out, it is interrupted by a man I knew only as Mr. Fred, the chair of the Baptist equivalent of the personnel council. Mr. Fred grabs a nearby microphone, bangs it to ensure it was on, then shouts into it, speaking to someone in the back of the sanctuary, “Gail? Gail? Can you turn on the lights? Gail?” Then he addresses the congregation, “You all can blow out your candles.” And with a slight twinkle in his eyes, he says, “We have some business to attend to.” Mr. Fred goes on to end the no-longer candlelit communion service by handing out the Christmas bonus checks to the senior and youth pastors in front of the congregation.

It was a fascinatingly tone-deaf way to end Christmas Eve, one that I cannot help but chuckle at now as a minister, knowing how much preparation goes into planning a service like that.

And yet Mr. Fred’s memorable gaffe, I believe, illuminates something central to the Christmas story: the disruption and disorder recorded in scripture but obscured by the images and ideals we hold around Christmas.

Perhaps, we can all agree, now just a week away from Christmas, that the holiday brings some pressure. According to the American Psychiatric Association, almost half of all adults say they worry more during the holiday season than the rest of the year. 31% of those surveyed this year say it is the most stressful Christmas season

of their lives. A recent article in the *New York Times* entitled “How to Actually Enjoy the Holidays”¹ lists the following as causes of stress in the season:

- Schedules are overwhelming – that one I can really relate to. This is the 1st of 5 services at GCPC from now to Christmas Day.
- Family feuds seem unavoidable
- Money is tight
- Vacation arrives, but relaxation doesn’t
- Office parties are awkward
- Children transform into monsters – I have no comment for that one
- Traveling is a nightmare
- Everyone is on a phone
- Other people are having way more holiday fun

Can you relate to any of these stressors? Or perhaps you have other issues pulling at you that are not anticipated by the Heath and Holiday section of the *New York Times*.

There is pressure in this season to do it right, to make it memorable. To be or feel or act in a certain way. Be reverent, provide, care; be charitable, social, thoughtful; behave, be present, be perfect; feast, give, and spend beyond your means - have a good Christmas.

And this Christmas pressure, this pressure for it all to be good and perfect, is ironic, because the Christmas story itself is about everything going wrong.

In the patriarchal culture of the Roman Empire, Mary’s pre- and extra-marital pregnancy was a death sentence.² Quite literally, in that the public disgrace named in Matthew 1:19 is a euphemism for the public stoning to death of a woman found to be pregnant by another man before the consummation of a marriage, according to Deuteronomy ch. 22. And even if that charge was not carried out, the ostracism caused by the quiet dismissal Joseph planned in that same verse 19 would have meant a life, or more accurately a slow-death, of poverty and abandonment in a time when life depended on your standing in the community. What’s more, by naming Joseph a “righteous man,” the Gospel signals that he followed the law, a

¹ Hannah Seo, et al. “How to Actually Enjoy the Holidays,” *The New York Times*. December 7, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/07/well/mind/holiday-stress.html>

² I am indebted in this section to Daniel J. Harrington’s exegesis of this passage in *The Gospel of Matthew*. Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 34-40.

religious script that demanded he not marry Mary, but rather send her away in disgrace.

This is a story, not just about things going wrong, but of catastrophe, according to the customs and expectations of the day. We must not downplay, then, the radicality of the angel's words then in v. 20: "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." In that pronouncement, through this incarnation, God breaks apart religious norms and household scripts; God makes a way where there was no way; God breathes life into death.

And yet this an aspect of the story easy to forget, because the church has sanitized this aspect of the incarnation. We have turned a deeply embodied, scandal of procreation into yet another abusive religious script. Today, belief in the virgin birth is a litmus test to prove one's adherence to religious norms and creeds. You better believe it, and your church better proclaim it, or else you're out of the club we call orthodoxy. What's more, the theology of the virgin birth has been central to the way Christianity has stigmatized sexuality, setting Mary as the pinnacle of purity and chastity, against which others – and by others, I mean women and, really anyone other than heterosexual cisgendered white men – are judged, shamed and shunned in church and community.

All of this is a great irony because Mary and the child in her womb were once threatened, even to the point of death, by the same type of religious powerholders and communities who now abuse others in their names.

Mary, once a survivor of patriarchal persecution, is now a symbol employed by violent systems and norms in church and culture.

And yet – and yet, her story continues to breathe life into the calcified season that we are in. For in this story, God breaks through social and religious norms; God defies death-dealing systems; God enters into this world and into our humanity without heeding the expectations of that time or ours today. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid," says the angel.

If we are being honest, it's not just Christmas expectations; the pressure to perform, to be perfect, to live up to the images of what life should be – well that pressure follows us all year round, doesn't it? And it stops us from seeing ourselves, and being with those around us, in life-giving ways. We get trapped in, and separated by, the *should be* rather than the *is*.

As one commentator of this passage puts it, “Amid all our less-than-perfect Christmases, the Christmas trees that are not quite as perfect as we want them to be, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something new.”³ Siblings in Christ, the beauty of the incarnation is that God comes anyway, before things are perfect, *because* things are anything but perfect. God comes to people who are not saints but people, willing and open enough to hear the angel’s call in a dream, and the whisper of the Spirit in a crisis. So, let us therefore keep watch, for as God did with the Holy family, so God does today: appearing in our midst.

And in this appearing, in this Advent, God creates room. God creates room for you and for me. Room for us to honor, love, care for, and cherish one another and ourselves. Room to breathe, room to lay down the unnecessary weight of shame, judgment, and the commercialized drive to perfection so associated with this season, so ingrained into our lives every day of the year.

And so, this Sunday, we light the candle of attachment, representing the new ways Christ frees us to be in relation to one another, real relationship, where we see each other not through the eyes of judgment but through the eyes of grace, brought near to us in the form of a child, who did not appear in the way he was supposed to, and because of that his very being is Emmanuel, God with us.

In this last Sunday of Advent, let us never stop looking for the appearance of the divine in our midst, disrupting and saving us from our systems and expectations, freeing us to be the people of God, together.

Amen.

³ Aaron Klink, “Pastoral Perspective: Matthew 1:18-25,” in *Feasting on the Word—Year A, Volume 1*, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 94.