

Not the Sign I Was Expecting

Matthew 1:18-25

Why do we love Christmas so much? Because it has good stories. When I was at Moose Lake last week I asked the guys to tell me their favorite Christmas memory. The stories were amazing. Some were beautiful. Some were heartbreaking. That's how Christmas is, isn't it?

You can tell a great deal about the storyteller from the way they tell the story. Only Matthew and Luke have Christmas stories and they are very different from each other. They also tell us very different things about Christmas. We tend to blend them into one but when we pay attention to how they individually tell the story, we get something new. As in most good stories, there is a set up, an introduction of suspense or conflict, a surprising twist and a conclusion. Matthew sets up the story in our reading for today with the main source of conflict. Mary is found to be “with child” before she is married. This would have been a considerable source of conflict – punishable by stoning in public and humiliation in private.

The gospel writer tells us that Joseph knew the child was from “Holy Spirit.” I'm not convinced that was Joseph's assumption at all. But you and I are not the story tellers here. Matthew is. So for Matthew, the idea that Mary is pregnant “because of God” is received as good news by Joseph. I mean, think about what the alternative would have meant! So we can see how this could actually be a relief for Joseph. He maintains his honor. He has a place in this new family being formed and in fact will play a pivotal role in protecting the infant from harm. Joseph is told that tradition had foretold this birth and that the child is to be named Jesus. According to Matthew, the angel even quotes from Isaiah as proof. Did you notice however that the quote from Isaiah says nothing about naming a child Jesus but naming a child Immanuel? Maybe the angel said it really fast so that Joseph wouldn't notice the discrepancy between the ancient story and what that story was supposed to mean for Joseph right then. Clearly both names have symbolic meaning. The name “Jesus” means “God saves” and the name “Immanuel” means “God is with us,” but they are nowhere near the same name – not in

Hebrew, not in Greek and not in English. For Matthew's telling of the story, the point was not getting the name right. The point was that this birth – with all of its questions and challenges and uncertainties – was a fulfillment of the promise that God is with them. And Matthew's point for the reader is that God is also with us. So Matthew is saying "God is with you," and then adding, "And also with you." Matthew gives us his own Sursum Corda in the middle of his story about Jesus' birth.

When Joseph went to sleep that night with all these questions cluttering his brain, Matthew tells us he was searching for a sign that would help him make sense of it all. [This was not the sign he was expecting.](#) If Joseph was looking for peace, this was not the peace he had in mind... but maybe it was a peace that revealed something deeper about his character, his faith, his loyalty.

When we heard that the Senate voted to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" it was an unexpected surprise. It was not the sign lots of us were expecting but we will take it.

This morning the Generosity Committee told us that the Building Hope campaign has exceeded \$16,000. That is a remarkable effort because it is your generosity over and above our regular support for the work and ministry of this church. I know there has been some sacrificial giving on the part of lots of us. The Committee has done a great job in laying out why this campaign is important. You may have noticed that they have talked about the purpose of this goal not so much in erasing a deficit – which it will help accomplish – but in how our combined efforts build hope. It was not the sign we typically expect. We tend to think of great spiritual acts being those moments where the great saints of the faith chose martyrdom or risked their lives or nailed theses on a door. Those are great moments and they are part of our faith story. But our story is about so much more. It is about the ways in which seemingly little things come together to make something so much more significant than what was expected. It is about how when we work together we discover the things that divide us are a lot less important than the things that unite us. It is about seeing in real tangible ways how living out our values and

faith together makes real differences in real people's lives. **That's what builds hope.** It's a great story that says a lot about the story tellers.

This Friday night we gather to re-tell what is often called the greatest story ever told. Christmas is a powerful story in the ways that shepherds, angels and magi have become larger than life figures. But it is the most powerful in how it births new life in us today – thousands of years later, thousands of miles away from the place it began, far away in terms of culture, language, time and understanding. When it causes us to pause to listen for the sound of angels' wings – when we allow our hearts to be touched by the plight of the poor – when we care what happens to the “least of these” then Christmas becomes alive once more. **We become part of the Christmas story. We become part of the sign that peace on earth and goodwill towards all is still possible.** It is not the sign that most people would be expecting. But that is because God knows how to tell a good story.

Sources:

www.homileticonline.com The God Who Sleeps Over, December 2010.