

“MAKING SPACE FOR THE UNEXPECTED”

Matthew 1:18-25
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I've been hearing the story of Jesus' birth for sixty years now and actually paying attention for about fifty of those years. I've been thinking, for reasons that will become apparent, about the parts of the story that I could do without.

I thought about the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, what we refer to as the annunciation. That the angel has a name and defers to Mary as one blessed by God, and that Mary is able to question how this birth could take place and then submit to it as “the servant of the Lord, adds depth to the story that we wouldn't otherwise have. We gain insight into the uniqueness of the event and into the character of Mary. How much poorer the story would be without this part.

And then there's Mary's visit with Elizabeth and Mary's song that flows out of that experience, a song that reveals Mary's strength and her prophetic spirit. What would Christmas be without the Magnificat to inspire us with a vision for a world made right? And there's so much more of Mary's story: wrapping the infant in cloth and laying him in the manger and at the end of the story there's this image of Mary “pondering these things in her heart.” What would happen if we lost these parts of Mary's story?

And what of the other angel who speaks to the shepherds and the angel choir that sings “Glory to God?” So many of our Christmas carols are built around these angels singing. And these shepherds who make haste to see the babe in Bethlehem bear witness to the truth that this infant comes for the most common among us, for the least. What would we do without these parts of the story? If we took them all out what would be left for the children's Christmas pageant?

What would we do without the journey to Bethlehem, the implicit invitation for us to join Joseph and Mary in the stable? What kind of story would we have without these elements? Well, we all know the answer to these questions. We read that story this morning. For Matthew, there is no journey to Bethlehem, no invitation to the manger, no manger in fact. There are no angels singing or shepherds making haste. No angel appears to Mary. She is simply “found to be with child.” An angel appears to Joseph, but only in a dream, and only to tell him to do the right thing. Mary is completely played down: no humble acceptance of her role, no visit with Elizabeth, no prophetic song. We have grown so fond of Luke's story that the sparseness of Matthew's account surprises us.

This is a major story for our faith. To some theologians, it is the central story. Some believe that the sacrifice in becoming human was even greater than the sacrifice on the cross. So we want to hear some details. We want to know what Mary is thinking and how she feels about it. But in Matthew, we don't even know if she is aware of the significance

of the child she will bear. We want there to be some sort of fanfare around it, setting it apart as a most important event. But no one is there except Mary and Joseph.

So as I think about the breadth and depth of Luke's Christmas story, there isn't any of it that I feel I could do without. And yet Matthew does. It's as if he had to clear out the distractions of detail from Luke in order to tell his own story. Janet talked about this process back in September when we introduced the theme for the year: "making space." We are very distractible and sometimes, in order to see something new or just to see it clearly, we have to pare away the distractions. I am not suggesting that Mary and manger, shepherds and angels, along with the journey to Bethlehem are mere distractions, but they have become so familiar as to overwhelm the good news of Jesus' birth according to Matthew.

So, push those things you love about this story from your mind, and while you're at it, forget about the wise men as well. We sometimes like to redeem Matthew's account by focusing on the magi, but they don't actually belong to the birth story. By the time they arrive, Jesus is already a toddler. At the birth, there is only Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and a dream.

Let's begin with Mary. We are told that she was engaged to Joseph and that "she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Notice how passive Mary is here. Even today, we speak of engagements as something that happens to a couple. Even though a lot of activity occurs beforehand from the first kiss to the proposal, we still speak of "being engaged." So she happens to be engaged and happens to be pregnant, a not uncommon occurrence, but nevertheless problematic.

You can imagine the conversation with Joseph. "I really don't know how this happened." And Joseph, being a "righteous man" we are told decides to do Mary a kindness by not drawing attention to her infidelity. I'm not sure why Joseph considers it a kindness to put her away quietly. What does he think will happen to her? But Joseph has no more to say than Mary. When an angel tells you, even if it's in a dream, to marry the woman, of course you do. Neither Mary's seeming sinfulness nor Joseph's apparent righteousness is allowed to get in the way of what God is doing. This is Matthew's main point. Christmas is about what God is doing.

The contrast between this Mary and Luke's Mary emphasizes the point. In Luke, Mary speaks with angels, considers herself the servant of the Lord, and prophesies great things about the child. She gives birth. She wraps. She lays him in the manger. She ponders things in her heart. In Matthew, she is simply "found to be with child," a not quite married pregnant woman, a metaphor perhaps for the human dilemma.

We try to do the right thing, but sometimes it just doesn't turn out the way we expected. Mary's about to marry a good man and then... this. Oh, it wasn't going to be a perfect life, but perhaps the best she could expect. We, too, like to take charge of our lives, make plans, fulfill expectations. We are taught to plan, to take responsibility, to work hard. No one else is going to make it happen for us. That's the wisdom we pass on to our children.

And it's not bad advice. But for the believer, the best things are unexpected. It's probably not an unplanned pregnancy, but there's sometimes something we consider a disaster that we look back on and say: "that is what has made all the difference."

Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Take that apart. Mary was found! Isn't that the gospel in three words? Is there anything more precious than being found after having utterly lost our way? Isn't this what grace is all about? To be found doesn't require any activity on our part. It just happens... unexpectedly.

And she wasn't just found, she was found to be with child, something you would expect to be a problem... but wasn't this time. She is given a special task, a meaningful task... to bear a child into the world. Is it not good news that we are all found to be with child? Are we not all children of God, waiting to emerge in the world? Christmas, according to Matthew, is not something done, but something given.

Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. It is God doing the giving. Don't look at the angels or the shepherds. Don't even look at Mary or Joseph. Look at the gift. Look at the child, the unexpected child "who will save his people from their sins."

You know, Luke doesn't mention this. He talks about the lowly being raised up and the mighty being brought low. He talks about a reversal of all that's wrong with the world. His gospel is about a social and historical transformation. It's a powerful message that we need. It fills out the meaning of Christmas. But it's not Matthew's story and we need Matthew's story because there's so much that we can't do. We are lost and waiting to be found. We are waiting on the gift of God to lend direction to our lives. We are waiting to hear what can be done about the mess we have created in our world. We are waiting to hear the good news that God has not abandoned us, that God is about to take action, and give us the unexpected gift which we so desperately need.

And what is that gift? Clear away the details. Don't get lost in someone else's story. Matthew reduces to story to a single word (three words in English): Emmanuel, God with us."

It's not as full a story, but in some ways it's more personal. I'll never forget the time when Dennis Dewey, a biblical story-teller recited the genealogy from the first chapter. He started the "begats" from a distance and as he progressed he got a little closer to his listeners so that when he came to "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born" he was in the midst of the audience ... and his gesture placed the infant Jesus into someone's arms. This is Christmas: Jesus for you... God with us... Emmanuel. May we all be found this Christmas by the Holy Spirit and receive the very presence of God among us and within us. Amen.