

Make the Nations Prove: Peaceful Joy
Advent Meditation
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
December 8, 2019

Isaiah 7:13-15; Matthew 1:18-25

*He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove,
the glories of his righteousness,
and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders of his love.*

Consider this - when the time comes for a married pregnant woman to give birth her partner has a few key responsibilities. In this region, that means driving to Bridgeport or New Haven without getting into a car accident. Making sure the insurance card is handy. Grab the Go-bag. And breathe. There's not really much more to do. That supporting role is limited, which means it shouldn't get too messed up.

But Joseph messed it up. He couldn't even find a room for Mary to give birth in. Imagine trying to live that down. Imagine Joseph as the day drew near. No money. No safe place for his wife to give birth. No plausible explanation for her pregnancy. I don't know what a perfect first century family looked like, but I'm quite certain his didn't fit the ideal. How scared they must have been. How strange they must have felt. Confused. Needy. Imperfect. Their unusual family turned upside down before it even began.

I know a thing or two about unusual families. I come from one. There is a picture in a frame on my mother's dressing table of the day she and my dad were married on December 20th, 1970. It was taken moments after the ceremony. She was in a simple, floor length blue dress. They are holding hands, standing tall, surrounded by both sets of parents and grandparents. They look happy, but also totally overwhelmed. Not much peaceful joy.

What the picture doesn't show is that my mother, at the tender age of 19, had by then divorced my biological father following a string of domestic violence. I can't imagine the fear she must have felt, along with the drive to protect her infant daughter - me. In those days, it was unusual to get divorced, have a baby and then remarried in 18th months. It must have made their heads spin! When I look at that wedding picture now, I see for them a beginning that must have been far from ideal.

I did see one ideal family this week. On the internet. Look them up, if you have the chance - the Holderness family. A mom, a dad and their two kids who have made a video card called "Christmas Jammies" each year for the past 6 years and put it on You-Tube. In it they sing and dance in matching pajamas while boasting of the year's accomplishments. Their kids seem perfect. They bought a new car!

Ran triathlons! Have a huge house! She appeared in the movie Ironman 3 and he quit his job as a news anchor to, well, . . . start a video company. So not only is it a Christmas card that seems like an advertisement for their perfect family, it's also an advertisement for how perfectly they can make a Christmas card!

This week in confirmation we had the opportunity to see how each of the birth stories about Jesus treated Mary & Joseph's unusual family drama. Mark's Gospel begins with a preacher's proclamation: "*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, the son of God*" – a claim of divinity that might have shocked and even offended a Jewish audience. But no real baby story.

Luke is even more counter-cultural – beginning with the priest Zechariah getting an angelic vision of the birth of John the Baptist that he does NOT believe. Next, young Mary – who as a woman, couldn't legally testify to what she had seen – is visited by that same angel Gabriel, and becomes the first to believe.

Matthew begins in a way educated religious Jews of his day would have appreciated – with a long genealogy, a respectable Jewish resume, designed to impress. It's there as a reminder that what Matthew is about to tell us is a continuation of a much bigger story of sin and sacrifice and grace and deliverance that has been going on for generations. Next, we hear of a simple Jewish carpenter getting a visit from an angel and believing the Good News. Matthew lets the man tell the story, because to his audience, he is the best (and only qualified) witness.

It's a love story – and perhaps a failed one at that. We are told that this carpenter Joseph, a good and righteous man, is done wrong by his cheating fiancé Mary. She is pregnant and he knows the baby isn't his. It could have been a country song if it had happened a few centuries later in the Appalachian foothills and not in Bethlehem of Judea.

Sometimes I think we forget how bad that must have been for Joseph – the heartbreak and the humiliation, the way his friends looked at him, what his relatives might have said behind his back. If you've ever had someone you loved cheat on you, you know that feeling.

But Joseph does a surprising thing: *"being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."* That speaks volumes, I think, about Joseph, that he is willing to offer his "unfaithful" bride to be this generous outpouring of forgiving love.

According to their laws (Deut. 22:23-24), *"If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death."* To Joseph's community, stoning Mary to death was not only his legal right, it was his proper civic and religious obligation. In following the letter of the law he would set a public example and make his fiancé's death a deterrent to other women.

But instead, Joseph breaks the law of his ancestors and offers her the gift of a second chance. Like the God who made him, he offers amazing grace in the face of what everyone else assumes is a flagrant sin.

The angel's message, where the truth of Isaiah's prophecy was revealed to him, probably mattered as little to his people as the visitation Mary had from Gabriel. Neither of them were thought qualified to think for themselves, much less have a direct relationship with *"God with us,"* Christ Immanuel.

But it was enough to turn him from eventually putting her aside to choosing to stay and raise the baby as his own. Joseph, this religious nobody, with no priestly pedigree or training and under no rabbinical advice – makes a decision that sets the tone for the entire message of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: *Jesus's Law of Love is the one law that fulfills all the other law.* Heart over head... love over law... is the only way to finding lasting, joyful, true Peace.

We Christians are called to love God as in the Hebrew Scriptures, with all our heart and soul and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves – but also with our minds, which is the one word Jesus added to the original Torah text. We are called into relationship with our still-speaking God. We hear the yearning for "Emmanuel" to be present so that God's peace, truth, love, and justice will reign among all the world and bring balance to what feels out-of-sorts. Created in God's image, we are fragile and fallable, but we are also children God deeply loves amongst all our messiness. Let us respond to our call, especially in this sacred season, to share God's love with the world. Amen.