

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

*Rev. Andy Rutrough*



Sermon, December 18, 2022

Matthew 1:18-25

I love all of those paintings that the great artists have made of Mary and Joseph in a barn or stable, gazing at the Christ child, the light of God shining in the darkness.

It's beautiful, this moment when all is calm and all is bright like the words to the Christmas carol "Silent Night" say. People even call Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus the Holy Family.

I think, however, that sometimes we get the impression that Jesus's family, and that any really good family, any decent family, will be like that all the time, or at least, most of the time. Shining with the light of Christ, calm, at peace.

We sometimes even think that because our families are not perfect, not like the Holy Family, then our families are bad families, inadequate families. Now, I want to acknowledge that some families have more times of joy than others, and sometimes we find new families: families of friends, adopted families, families at church, we can even be a family for ourselves sometimes. And we can improve our families. But no family is perfect. Perfect families are like unicorns. People talk about them. People draw them. People tell stories about them. They don't exist.

Even Jesus's family had times which were neither calm nor bright. For example, in the gospel lesson for today, Joseph has found out that Mary is pregnant, and Joseph knows for a fact that he is not the father. He is trying to figure out the right thing to do based on God's law and the expectations of society around him.

In our society, we might ask, "Well, why doesn't he ask Mary for her side of the story?" I mean, Mary doesn't say a word in this story. In Luke, she speaks. In Luke,

she roars. But not here. In our society, we might take issue with how Joseph is treating Mary. But that's kind of what it means to be human, isn't it. We live in societies. We try our best within those societies, and sometimes our best is not that good.

It says that Joseph is a righteous man. That means he seeks to treat people as persons. So, even though God's Law in the book of Deuteronomy said that he is supposed to humiliate Mary, make a spectacle of her, even have her stoned to death, nevertheless, Joseph decides not to do that. Instead, he decides to divorce her quietly.

Situation is certainly calmer than it could have been. Still not very bright.

An angel comes to Joseph. You know how, sometimes, angels come to us. They may come in the form of a friend or a family member, or a stranger, or something that happens in our community or world. God might send an angel to us, even in a dream, like with Joseph. The angel says, basically, "This idea you had, trying to do your best with your understanding of God's law as it connects with the society around you, that's not what God wants you to do. God wants you to do something different."

Sometimes that's going to happen. When it does, it will always, ultimately have to do with hope, and always, ultimately have something to do with mercy.

The angel says to Joseph, "Do not be afraid."

Angels tell us not to be afraid a lot. There's a reason for that. In Joseph's case, the angel is telling him to complete the marriage contract with Mary, don't break it off. That means for the rest of his life, people are going to be whispering behind Joseph's back: "Joseph the fool. You know Mary slept around on him, don't you. Joseph the cuckold."

Angels usually require courage of us.

The angel tells Joseph to adopt Jesus. Naming someone in those days meant you were adopting them. So, Jesus is an adopted child. Joseph is a stepfather. He is a good stepfather. He sticks with his family and works to serve his family even when the going gets tough. Like so many good stepfathers and stepmothers who love the children in their lives, he takes risks and makes sacrifices for Mary and Jesus. After Jesus is born, the angel comes to him again and says, "Get up, move now. Herod is

trying to murder the Christ child.” So, Joseph gets up and he and Mary flee across the desert to Egypt, as refugees.

Not calm, not bright.

And if you look at the verses before the gospel lesson for today, that’s the genealogy of Jesus, the list of his ancestors. In those days, a list of ancestors told everyone who you were. So, for example, one of the the Pharoahs of Egypt claimed to be able to trace his ancestry back to the sun god, Ra. That meant that he, the Pharoah was divine.

Jesus’s ancestry goes back to Abraham, emphasizing his place in the Jewish tradition. It also includes some very sketchy characters and some positively purple stories which I can’t tell here because we have children present. So, yes, Jesus is heir to Jewish tradition. Jesus also has so many skeletons in his closet there’s not even room for shoes.

We all have them. Skeletons.

Not a perfect family.

Now, here’s the good news. Matthew says that Jesus is to be known as “Emmanuel, God with us.” Here at the beginning of Matthew, Jesus is “God with us.” At the end of Matthew, the last line of the gospel, Jesus says, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus is with us.

And Jesus saves. The angel tells Joseph to name him Jesus, which is a translation of the Hebrew name, “Joshua.” That is, Ya-shua. Ya, for Yahweh, or God, and Shua, for saves. “God saves.”

Here’s what that means for us. It means all our families are holy. Whatever kind of family you have, whatever kind of family you are, any time you share the love of God, you shine with the light of Christ, your family is holy.

So, watch for the moments when you shine. Remember them because they are the truth. They are not just flickerings of brightness in the overwhelming dark. They are not mere moments of goodness washed away in a flood of evil. They are visions of the Truth. They are windows on the foundation of reality and the destiny of creation.

Those moments make us able to hear the angels and their terrifyingly hopeful calling. They remind us of God's presence in the not calm, not bright moments. They will bring us home.

Watch for the light. Be the light, Christ with us, God saves.