

Sermon for Advent 4A
Sunday, December 18, 2022
“Matthew’s Nativity Story: Be not afraid”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am certain that we are all familiar with at least some part of the Nativity story, like the annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she was to conceive and bear a son, or the visitation of Mary to her kinswoman, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, or words of the Magnificat—or the Song of Mary—that begins, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.” Today’s Gospel reading *isn’t* that story. Today’s Gospel lesson is part of Matthew’s nativity story and begins, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” Matthew’s nativity story is different from Luke’s nativity story; we will hear Luke’s version at the Christmas Eve Mass next Saturday evening. While Luke’s version focuses on Mary’s role in Jesus’ birth and the Incarnation of God to humankind, Matthew’s version is told in order to legitimize Jesus as a descendent of the line of David and the seed of Abraham. Matthew gives a comprehensive genealogy in the previous seventeen verses of Chapter 1. Matthew’s genealogy links Jesus to all of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Bible since Abraham, through King David down to Joseph. And the announcement of Jesus’s birth is given, the Annunciation, is given to Joseph, not Mary. In a dream. Now you may be wondering, “If Jesus’s conception was by the Holy Spirit, how is he related to all those folks if he wasn’t Joseph’s biological son?” That is the other important reason why Matthew stated that Jesus’s birth took place “in this way.”

The last verse of today’s Gospel lesson says that Joseph was to name Jesus. That action was critical. It was through the naming of Jesus by Joseph that Jesus would receive his earthly lineage and inheritance. In doing so, Joseph adopted Jesus as his son, which legally conferred upon Jesus a link to the ancient Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs: to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, Ruth, Solomon, King David, and Zadok, the first high priest of the First Temple built by Solomon. So, by Jesus being adopted into the lineage of Joseph, he was the rightful heir to the throne of Israel and to the high priesthood of the Temple. Today’s Gospel lesson sets the stage for the coming of the Messiah who would bring about salvation, not just to Israel, but to all humanity. That’s what the name of Jesus means. Yeshu’a, God saves. Emmanuel, God with us. The name of Jesus was very important, and who named him was very important. Mary and Joseph took the angel’s advice seriously, and without fear they did as the angel had told them.

The second important aspect of Matthew’s nativity story deals with how Mary is portrayed. We are told that Mary had been engaged to Joseph, *but before they lived together*, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Just think about this for a second: an unmarried teenage girl aged 14 or 15 becomes pregnant. You know what people would think, because you’re probably thinking it right now—some dude from Nazareth went and knocked up Mary. (Actually, they probably would have blamed Mary for

getting herself knocked up, and left the guy alone.) But, she was already engaged to Joseph, probably by some family arrangement. Engagements in the days of Mary and Joseph didn't mean quite the same thing that we understand in our present time and culture. The first-century Jewish custom of engagement or betrothal happened long before the actual marriage. It was usually the result of an agreement between the fathers of the man and the woman, and it was a binding contractual agreement that meant that the two were bound to each other just as they would be in a marriage, except there was no intimate contact and they would not live together. Sometime later, when the girl came of age, they would be married. Then they could live together as husband and wife and consummate the marriage appropriately.

The angelic news that Joseph received in Matthew's gospel version created a real problem for the two of them. While Mary and Joseph heard the voice of an angel, the rest of the world did not. What would people think? They would have thought that Mary had committed adultery. Jewish law, according to the Torah, was very explicit; the woman and the adulterous other man were to be taken out of the city and stoned to death. But, Roman law forbade Jewish death penalties, so the only other option was divorce. When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, being a "righteous man" he wanted to follow Jewish law. His love for her made him not want her to be subjected to public disgrace, so he planned "to dismiss her quietly"; in other words, he was going to divorce her. But then, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained that the child that Mary was carrying was from the Holy Spirit. They must have been very confused, but the angel told them, "Be not afraid." This was no ordinary situation; God had chosen Mary to be the vessel by which he would take on human form and enter into human history. Mary was to be the fulfillment of the prophecy told by Isaiah that we heard in the first lesson today: "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." God was in the midst of all this, and Mary and Joseph need not be afraid because God had already worked everything out for them.

"Be not afraid," those reassuring words of the angel, is the message for us today. There are countless things that happen in our lives that make us afraid: a change in our personal and family life, a change to our health, a change in our workplace, a change in our church, a change in our nation, a change due to a major loss, the death of a loved one. The holidays bring back many memories and raise many emotions; they can be especially joyous or especially painful, depending on where your life's journey has taken you. The anticipation of what our future will look like raises our anxiety, because we fear the unknown. But the same angel that spoke to Mary and Joseph a long time ago and told them, "Be not afraid," speaks to us today and tells us not to be afraid, because God is present in the midst of all the changes, chaos, joys, and sorrows. God is at work, God is making something important happen in our lives and in the world around us. In Mary and Joseph's case, God was about to enter human history and himself become human. He came to earth at a chaotic and turbulent time. Truth be told, it's always a chaotic and turbulent somewhere on earth—that's how life is. Sometimes it feels like we have to really look hard for God's presence, in the midst of life's chaos.

It's easy to feel that God has abandoned us or to ask, "How could a loving God let such a thing happen." It can be hard to see how and where is God moving. Often we don't recognize God's handiwork until long after the turmoil has passed. But if we trust that God's got it all under control, then we need not be afraid, because *Emanu-el*, God himself is with us. God loves humankind so much that he was willing to live among his creation to let us know that he is always with us, even in the midst of chaos.

That's worth rejoicing, and that should make us feel calm as we look eastward to await the celebration of the birth of Jesus later this week, and as we patiently await the Messiah's return at a future time. So, be not afraid. *Emanu-el*. God is with us. Amen.