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“Christmas plans?” **Sermon on Matthew 1:18-25**

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Our text this morning begins in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. It is also the first book of the New Testament. The lectionary has us beginning with the 18th verse; I suspect because no one wants to hear a list of names.

Matthew begins with names. Old names. He says in verse one, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Verse two begins the genealogy. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Sixteen more verses continue with just names. You can see why we never read it!

Names on names... if you’re here on Christmas Eve, we will hand you a booklet that has a list of names for whom poinsettias were given. Some in memory.

I looked at the names, Bob and Kitty Ikard. I can remember Bob and Kitty telling me how they met on a blind date. Saw each other at the door, and Bob said, “On the phone, you sounded taller.” Kitty responded, “You sounded shorter.” I remember her bright smile. I wouldn’t call Bob’s smile bright. But I can still see him dancing to the music in Greece.

I saw Paul Lyle... Paul - bigger than life Paul with the Tennessee Orange tie. The first time I met him, he said, “Preacher, if you see me asleep in the pew, it’s only because I trust you.” One of the most beautiful conversations in my life was with Paul. He was in a hospital room, and he was sharing how amazing and beautiful life is. Paul Lyle is not just a name.

Betty Hadley is on the list. I met her the first time when I was moving into my office, and she brought me some of those shortbread cookies with powdered sugar all over them. Some years later, I told her I really enjoyed those cookies and asked, “Have you ever thought of doing that for me again?” Betty smirked and said, “No. I did that to be nice. It was before I really got to know you.”

You can see why Matthew is the first book in the New Testament, because of all the names... Names that are linked to stories of life and faith.

If you know the story of Abraham and Sarah, you'll remember the day they were at Home Depot to look at paint samples for the nursery. They were 99 years old. It took them 45 minutes just to get out of the car. Just slow and old.

The child who would occupy the nursery was Isaac, which means laughter. The joke was on him when his own son Jacob, a name that means trickster, put sheepskin on his arms to fool his blind old man into giving him his twin brother's birthright. Jacob's brother was named Esau, which means hairy! He was gifted in the testosterone department.

In Matthew's list of names, there are the names of women. That shouldn't surprise us. After all, I have on occasion introduced myself as The Rev. Dr. Donovan Drake, The Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church; you've probably heard of me. And the response is, "Are you Beth's husband?" "Yeah. I'm Beth's husband."

Which is the point! Matthew reminds the congregation that the women in the genealogy save the day. The women who are named suffered injustice and disparaging innuendo. Every single one of them. But they are faithful and they save the day.

And that's where our text begins with: "Mary, who is the mother of Jesus, whose husband is Joseph."

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus.

Mary and Joseph had a plan. The plan was to get engaged. They did that! It wasn't a romantic engagement. It felt more like visiting a lawyer's office. It was a legal thing. The families all gathered around the cherry wood table, "sign here and here and initial here and here." An engagement could last a number of years. To annul an engagement, a court order would be required. It was like being married, but without all the fun.

Thus, the problem. Mary was pregnant.

I suspect she let Joseph know that she was pregnant, but the text doesn't say that. It could be that she waited to get her nerve up. But maybe she never got her nerve up, and Joseph said, "You're not looking like yourself there, Mary. You're nauseated, you're hardly eating..." Maybe she came right out with the news. "Joseph, a strange thing happened to me the other night. I am with child by way of the Holy Spirit."

Is there any way to say that and make it sound believable?

"I am with child by way of the Holy Spirit."

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Whatever way she said it, it didn't hold water. "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." He wasn't buying it. I can't blame him. But I do feel for Mary.

Have you ever known something to be true, but had it received as if it were false? "I'm telling you the truth." "I don't think you are." "Why don't you believe me?" It's painful.

Ask the mother whose child is not accepted by other children. Why was the child not accepted? The word on the street, though unspoken, is that the child isn't pretty enough. The child is awkward. The child is slow. But the mother knows the truth because it's her beautiful baby. The light of the world. A gift of God! A truth that is not believed.

To have truth be received as false. Well, I think the Gospel of John says it best. "The true light came into the world, yet the world did not know him. His own people did not accept him." The Gospel of Mark says that those who were closest to him - his own disciples denied him. That had to be as painful as nails.

To not believe the truth. I suppose every time we know the name of Jesus, and yet turn our backs on him so that we can be mean, rude, or hateful... "for as you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me."

How do you make people believe you? How do you make people believe that the way of Jesus is the way that life should be lived? How do you make people believe that you need to love all people? How do you get people to stop their bigotry? How do you stop the insanity of war?

You can yell at them! Yelling at people is a great way to get your message across! "What's the matter with you! How can you be so stupid!" Sometimes, just yelling makes you feel better if you can get others to join you. They say the whole crowd shouted, "Crucify him!" Because we all know the truth.

The early church decided that the best plan was to look like a cross. That they would humbly carry a cross into the world. That when the world was against them, they would turn the other cheek. They would be a lighthouse for people who walked in darkness. They would pray for their enemies. They would feed the hungry in the name, ... It is the name to whom every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. It's more than a name. Let me show you who Jesus is!

I think it must have hurt Mary to be called a liar by her fiancé. She was telling the truth, but he called her a liar.

Her fiancé had a name. Joseph, and somewhere back in his DNA, there's a story of another Joseph, who dreamed dreams and believed the dreams he dreamed. Living the dreams brought salvation. Joseph, it's not just a name.

Joseph had a dream! And a change of plans.

I wonder what it was like to be Joseph the morning after the dream. Did he lie in bed, look at the ceiling, and say to himself, "Do I believe that dream, or is it more important to think I'm right and righteous?"

Or did he walk over to Mary's home? Maybe he ran over to Mary's home, knocked on her door and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't believe you. But I promise before God and these witnesses to love you in joy

and in sorrow, plenty and in want, sickness and health as long as we both shall live. I will love you. We'll name that boy Jesus. The Lord is salvation, that's what Jesus means."

"I will plan to hold that child in my arms and raise him as if he's my own. I plan to take him to the synagogue. I plan to teach him to read the scriptures. I plan to tell him all about my dreams for us! I plan to live as though God is with us! God is with us! Mary! God is with us! That's my plan. That's God's plan. That's our plan."

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