

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 80:1-3, 17-19 & Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-3, 17-19:

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us!
3 Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
18 Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Matthew 1:18-25 - The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

*18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah[a] 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. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;[b] and he named him Jesus.*

A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed, she blurted out, “Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!”

A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement.

Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said, “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

Here we are at the fourth Sunday of Advent. We’ve been reminded of the hope, peace and joy that Christ brings to us during the first three weeks of advent. Today, we will consider yet one more gift God gives us—that is the gift of love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his

only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Let's begin our reflection on love as we consider Joseph's role in the Christmas story.

Have you ever tried to imagine how Joseph must have felt when he found out that Mary was pregnant, and he wasn't the father of the child? Without the knowledge that we have now, we would understand if he felt angry, betrayed and deeply hurt.

Mary and Joseph's relationship began with an engagement arranged by their parents or a professional matchmaker when they were yet children. The arrangement was usually made before the couple ever met each other.

The next step in their relationship was called the betrothal period. This step was actually the confirmation of the engagement. At this point, the engagement entered into by the parents or the matchmaker could be broken if the girl was unwilling to go on with it. But once the betrothal was entered, it was absolutely binding. The couple was legally known as husband and wife—without the rights of being husband and wife. The betrothal lasted for one year. The only way a betrothal could be dissolved was through a divorce.

So, Mary and Joseph were in this serious committed relationship known as betrothal, and Mary gets pregnant with what Joseph knows must be another man's child. If he wished to end the relationship at that point, he would need to divorce her, possibly exposing Mary to extreme hardship or death. But Joseph didn't do that.

I don't know about you, but I happen to think that Joseph was a pretty remarkable guy even before the angel visited him in a dream and rectified Joseph's assumption that Mary had cheated on him. According to the law of that day and social conventions, Joseph had every right to throw the book at her. But instead of succumbing to these so called "rights," he decided to divorce her quietly, hoping to save her from public disgrace. I see this as a compassionate and loving decision.

When we feel we are wronged, we should be careful about making assumptions about what happened. Those assumptions may be incorrect. They may fuel our emotions negatively leading to regrettable and misdirected reactive behaviors acceptable by social conventions like gossiping, revenge, broken relationships, and even lawsuits. We need to seek and be open to the truth. I think we do too much assuming these days, making us a defensive, angry, spiteful, apathetic society.

Something else we might ask ourselves when considering the man, Joseph as a righteous man, which indicates to me that he had a relationship with God. What did he say to God when he prayed before the angel's visit? Was his prayer like that of the author of the Psalm we heard this morning, recognizing the good that God has done in the past but wondering where God was now? When reading the Psalms, we might find it remarkable that God's people include such raw and honest expressions of misery in the Bible. Through the prayers of the psalms, God is teaching us to pray with skepticism about whether God hears prayer!

If Joseph's prayers were like that in Psalm 80, we would find it understandable why Joseph might have felt abandoned by God. But we know Joseph was not abandoned. That is confirmed for us when one of God's angels appeared to Joseph in a dream to deliver the message that he should take Mary to be his wife and that the baby she carried within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Our prayers should be so raw and honest when we feel abandoned because of the circumstances that arise on our lives. The silence we commit when we avoid admitting these feelings, perhaps, because we believe it to mean we are weak in faith or that it's just wrong to make accusations of this nature to God, in reality, reveals the assumption that God does not care

about us when we are bombarded by troubles and pain. However, when we approach God with skepticism about whether He is listening to us, we actually are seeking God and may not even realize it. We present an open heart to God with our honest prayers—a heart though which God can enter and reveal His presence to us. We should not feel ashamed in being honest with God, and neither should we assume that God doesn't care when we are hurting.

One other thing about Joseph's role in this story with his assumptions dispelled is that he was obedient to God's will. He married Mary and when the baby was born, he named him Jesus. Why was Joseph so willing to obey the command of the angel? Again, we can only speculate on that. Perhaps, it had something to do with the fact that the angel told him the baby in Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit was not something to be taken lightly even by the people in Joseph's day.

Joseph, as was the case with all Jews, didn't know the Holy Spirit as we know the Holy Spirit. "According to the Jewish idea, the Holy Spirit was the person who brought God's truth to humanity. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the prophets what to say; it was the Holy Spirit who taught people of God what to do; it was the Holy Spirit who, throughout the ages and the generations, brought God's truth to people." Also, "The Jews believed that the Holy Spirit not only brought God's truth to people but also enabled people to recognize that truth when they saw it." (William Barclay)

The angel was telling Joseph that this baby that Mary was carrying was very, very special. This was then confirmed with the angel stating that the baby should be named Jesus, meaning he saves, "for he will save his people from their sins." The angel also reminded Joseph of the prophecy made by Isaiah—"The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke, he may have thought to himself, "Could this be true? Could this baby that Mary conceived be the one we've been waiting for—the one who will change the world?" The Jewish people were even then looking for a Messiah, God's promised Messiah, who would come to save them. The bible doesn't tell us all what he thought but we know that he changed his mind about divorcing Mary.

Understanding the Holy Spirit as we do now, we can say that the same Holy Spirit that conceived this precious baby that Mary carried led Joseph to the truth, filled him with love and compassion, and prompted him to be obedient to the angel's command.

Joseph's story is a testimony to the meaning of love. We might call it a precursor to what Jesus teaches us about loving others. We learn that love can involve struggle. Love is compassion. A sign of love is openness to the truth. Love involves faith and obedience. Love is a gift of the Holy Spirit that flows freely from within us.

While Joseph gives us insight into the meaning of love; Jesus teaches us about love and has shown us the most profound meaning of love. He is Emmanuel, God With Us, God's Living Love With Us, Savior of the World; and we should have the same kind of love living in and through us.

I recently read this poem. It's a spin on 1 Corinthians 13 for Christmas.

"If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights, and shiny balls; but do not have love, I'm just another decorator.

"If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime; but do not have love, I'm just another cook.

“If I work at a soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home, and give all that I have to charity; but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

“If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties, and sing in the choir’s cantata, but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

“Love stops the cooking to hug the child. Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse. Love is kind, though harried and tired. Love does not envy another’s home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens. Love does not yell at the kids to get out of the way but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

“Love does not give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who cannot. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails.

“Toys will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust; but giving the gift of love will endure.”

Amen.