

Unexpected Things
St. Matthew 1:18-25
Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri
December 24, 2013 – The Eve Of Christmas



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. You all know why you're here tonight – to celebrate the eve of the birth of Jesus. Indeed, that's the focus of tonight's Scripture readings. It's a familiar story, but I'm concerned that for most of us it has become so familiar that we've begun to lose our sense of wonder over the circumstances of this glorious event. We've heard the account so many times it's become ordinary and every day. "Oh, that's the story of Joseph and Mary. I've heard all that before. I know what that's all about." Still, dear Christian, you dare not allow this to become so commonplace in your thinking that you see it as dull, boring or matter-of-fact.

Now the story of our Savior's birth starts out quite simply with a man and a woman engaged to be married – which in that day was tantamount to actually being married. The woman, Mary, found out she was going to have a Child – and, since the father could not have been her betrothed husband, Joseph, people would soon start to wonder. At first Joseph reacted as one might expect. Being a righteous man, he knew the Law would not allow him to marry an adulteress. In fact, the Law demanded Mary be stoned. No one would have faulted Joseph had he decided to dump Mary – indeed, it would have been expected. But here is where the unexpected occurs. Joseph allowed love to rule over his sense of justice. He didn't spitefully seek to show Mary's sin to the whole town because he still loved her. It's true, he had fully intended to divorce her as the Law allowed, but it's how he decided to divorce her that marks Joseph as a Godly man. He would divorce her quietly so that shame would not befall his beloved Mary.

This is quite different from what you might expect. After all, we sinners aren't usually kind to other sinners. We don't like to hide our neighbor's sin but would much prefer to parade it around in front of others, because it makes us look good while making our neighbor appear wicked. However, Joseph, rather than bringing shame on his bride, resolved to put her away quietly. That was when the unexpected happened. An angel of the Lord came to him and said: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you will give Him the name, Jesus, because He will save His people from their sin."

And as Matthew reminds us, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "The Virgin will be with Child and give birth to a Son, and they will call His name Immanuel, which means, 'God with us.'"

As you might expect, Joseph's reaction to this Word also produced an unexpected result. Although reason told him something wasn't right, Joseph received this Word from God and believed it, immediately rising from his bed and carrying out what God commanded. Here, dear friends, here is true faith. Joseph pushed reason aside and obeyed the Word God had sent to him, even though this action would likely cause him trouble by inviting shame and dishonor upon himself. By marrying this apparently adulterous woman, his own good reputation might well be ruined. Nevertheless, Joseph acted in faith, and not in accord with his own reason.

But what about the message the angel brought to Joseph? Is it not also unexpected? What I mean is that no matter what our eyes or reason might tell us, this birth was not contrary to God's Law, but upheld it! The Child in Mary's womb was the Fulfillment of all God had promised. ***This Child was God's own Son*** conceived in a miraculous way, and not in lust outside of marriage the way so many children come into our world today. This was a Holy Child spoken into being by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin. And as such, this Holy Child would have God's own name. He would be called Jesus, the Savior, the Promised One who would take away the sin of the world. This ***was*** Immanuel – "God with us" – God Himself veiled in human flesh.

Is this not an unusual thing for God to do? Instead of coming with power and a display of great might, the Son of God laid aside all that was His by right and came humbly in human visage. Here God invited shame onto Himself by being born of a lowly Virgin – brought into this world by means of one of His own creatures. Here in Mary's womb God would take on human flesh and the scorn of wicked men. He would permit Himself to be nailed to a cross, to suffer, die, and be buried in the dirt of the earth He had created. What unexpected love this love of God is, that He would consent to His own Son becoming the Child of a Virgin so that you and I might be called the children of God – and, as Paul reminds us, that ***is*** what we are!

Yet to this day – as Good as this News is – the Incarnation and birth of our Lord Jesus Christ still invites the scorn of the world, for man’s reason cannot understand any of it. Our world despises the idea that God would take on human flesh to save us from our sin. The very thought that a virgin could conceive and bear God in her own womb, nurse Him, and even change His dirty diapers, is sheer folly. Still and all – though such thoughts are far from ever being fully understood by us – they are, in fact, the most wonderful Gospel Word anyone could ever utter. It is the blessed proclamation of God’s unending love for all mankind. Even the name of this Child is purest Gospel – Jesus: the Savior, *our* Savior, *your* Savior. This is the One promised from of old who would suffer in His own body so that He might bear the punishment for your sin. This is the One who would willingly step forward in your place to receive the full wrath and punishment of God so that you might be saved from sin, death, the devil and hell. What a sweet name Jesus is – a name that tells you what God gives us, a pure Gospel name, a name full of Good News, a name full of gifts, a name full of life, true life.

Imagine – the Son of God descended from His proper throne in heaven at the right hand of the Father to be with you and me. He *is* literally and truly God-with-us. Ours is not a God who sits in some far-away place. He knows what it means to suffer sickness and temptation – what the heat of summer and the cold of winter feels like. He knows hunger, thirst, and the sting of death. He is your true Brother in every way – except when it comes to sin. That’s the one thing He could not fall victim to and still save you. And now this great miracle first proclaimed to Joseph has been freely given to you. God has come – and continues to come – to save you from your sin. And just as Joseph received this Word of God with faith, that’s how you must receive it also – for human eyes and reason cannot possibly comprehend how this can be. Like Joseph, you also must receive this Word in your ears – not through the voice of a heavenly angel, but through an earthly one. The preacher, for you, is that angel of God – for the word, “angel,” simply means messenger. The preacher’s voice – though just the voice of a mere man – is still the voice of God calling sinners to repentance and comforting them with the sure and certain promise of full and free salvation in the wounds of our Savior.

As Joseph received this Word of God in faith, you likewise must receive Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in faith – trusting that there God will give you what He promises. Just as Mary’s pregnancy appeared ordinary, yet was not, so likewise you can’t see forgiveness in the

water, the bread, or the wine. Still, God is there speaking and bestowing these gifts upon His children. Blind reason must be subdued so that faith can grasp this Word and believe that even though you can’t see Him, God is still there with us hidden in these ordinary means. At the end of His earthly ministry – when Jesus ascended back to the Father – He didn’t go far away never to be seen again. He is still present bodily among His people with His Word and Signs. He’s still present bodily among us in words, water, bread and wine to bind up all our wounds. He’s still bodily present among us to heal and cure all our iniquities.

During the Season of Advent we learned that our eyes are not to look back into the past or be fixed on the present. Rather we are to look for that Day which is yet to come when Christ has promised that He will return to take us home. But He won’t return on that day with the whisper of an angel in a dream. There will be no quiet Advent the second time around. What joy awaits us on that great, holy day when you will see Jesus with your own eyes as He comes to deliver us from this world full sin, sickness, death and tears! That’s why I say this Gospel is full of unexpected things for us poor sinners. And Joseph, like all the saints who have gone before, is a good example to follow, because he hears the Word and listens to it. He puts down his weak way of thinking and takes up the cross of faith. So take this Gospel to heart, dear Christian, and remember it well. Teach it to your children, and make sure they learn it and take it to heart.

See, your God comes to save you – to cover your sin with His holy precious blood once shed for sinners upon the cross. Write this Gospel upon your heart. Like Joseph, hear this Word and keep it. And like Jesus covered Joseph’s sins – and Joseph resolved to cover Mary’s apparent sin – so you too should cover one another’s sins with this Gospel as you share it with all who come across your path. This is the love God has given to you and me – the same love you are now to show others. In a very short time, our Lord will be here – this same One whom John pointed to as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Christ our Lord comes in human flesh to exchange your heavy load of sin for the blessed gifts of heaven: the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. May God be praised for His good work in us – for His abundant mercy toward us – and for showing and giving us His Son. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.