

December 22, 2019

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

You and I know that the story of Jesus' birth, as well as the story of his life on earth, is no Fairy Tale. It does not start out by saying – "Once upon a time," nor does it end with "they all lived happily ever after."

The story of Jesus' birth and his life on earth is filled with controversy from beginning to end. It is a story that keeps us interested because of all the twists and turns within it.

And we have four gospel writers and Paul who tell us their versions of the story of Jesus. And they, of course, don't always mesh.

Our gospel text today is the story of Jesus' birth by Matthew. In it we learn from the outset – the second sentence – that this is not going to be a story without drama.

Mary, engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, was pregnant. And the child within her was from the Holy Spirit. Anything but your normal birth narrative of the time.

Matthew tells us more about Joseph than the other gospel writers. And Joseph, when he learned of the pregnancy, decided to exit the situation, not really wanting to be involved with what he must have seen as a public disgrace that would top them all.

At first glance we might want to say – how could he be so mean? How could he just walk away – they were engaged to be married. And then at the same time we also realize what a dilemma Joseph was in.

Mary is proclaiming that the baby within her is of the Holy Spirit, not a human. What sane young woman would say that expecting everyone to just take her at her word? Mary is obviously convinced, but does she seriously believe it's a good idea to let everyone know – and of course, something like this is going to spread like wildfire. Once spoken, it will be repeated to every ear in the village quicker than email or Facebook.

We are not privy to all the goings-on of Nazareth, but we can easily imagine the whispers and the laughs and the wonderings if Mary has gone off the deep end. And - who really is the father of her child?

Then we skip ahead a little to where Joseph has a dream. And not just any dream. I'm certain it was not like the dreams or nightmares he may routinely have had. No this was a dream like no other. This was a dream where God appeared and spoke. I have to admit that I have not had such a dream, but I'm absolutely certain I would remember it well.

In the dream the Lord God told Joseph in no uncertain terms that he is in charge, that everything is going to be okay. The Lord confirms what Mary has been saying, namely that the baby within her is of the Holy Spirit. And furthermore this child will be a male child, a son, and his name has

already been picked by God himself. His name will be Jesus, Emmanuel, which means “God with us.”

And when Joseph awoke, he didn’t question the dream. He didn’t question if it really was the Lord who spoke to him in the dream. He didn’t question the content of the dream.

No, not at all. Joseph, according to Matthew, did exactly what God told him to do. It sounds as if he married Mary the next day. And when the baby was born he named him Jesus.

That truly is a compact story filled with enough intrigue to last a lifetime, or at least for a few years of Jesus’ life.

So what can we say about this Joseph who had a change of heart, like few other people in scripture? Can we imagine what must have been going through Joseph’s mind during the time before the dream and then up to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem? I sometimes wonder about that. What was he thinking? Not just about the present, but the future as well.

In the end Joseph goes from being somewhat of a bum, to a real stand-up guy who does not question a voice in a dream from God, who then awakes and sets about to do as God commands.

And beyond this story we know little more about Joseph. Yet he certainly is a key figure in this miracle-birth story. Isn’t he?

In a real and true sense we can simply thank God Joseph is a dreamer who hears God and follows God’s words to him.

In this dream Joseph certainly recognizes that the voice he hears is indeed the Lord God. Joseph must have understood that God chose to break into his sense of reality in a most unique way – through a dream.

We also see that Joseph ultimately cares less about what family, friends and neighbors think and follows God’s instructions to the letter.

We also see that Joseph adopts the divinely-begotten son into the line and family of David. Now, the prophecies of the past are fulfilled. Praise God.

But, you know, we can’t just leave this story in the past. It is a story that is over 2000 years old, for sure, but it is also a story that I think has meaning for us individually and for us as a congregation of Christ’s one holy church.

Let me pose this question to you as a way of bringing this text to relevance for today: in our world, our culture, our society and our neighborhood – what would it look like as a congregation of God’s people to picture ourselves in the place of Joseph – that is like-minded people who are devoted and determined amid uncertainty?

That question pertains also to each of us individually. What would our lives look like if we were as devoted and determined amid uncertainty as Joseph following his dream?

Uncertainty. We live with it daily. It is everywhere we look. There is uncertainty about most everything from local concerns to national and international situations. We are not sure how to define "high crimes and misdemeanors." Will the Senate now vote to acquit?

We're not sure about climate change either - at least we're not sure about the cause, but we certainly see the results. We're uncertain as to whether charter schools are really the way to go. We're not sure how growth should be regulated in our county. We're not sure that the new bike lanes are needed and are going to be permanent in downtown Lancaster.

We're not sure about how many churches that have lived through membership decline are going to fare in the near future.

Uncertainty. It's enough to get us down. Perhaps we should pray that the Lord will come to us as he did to Joseph so very long ago. Perhaps we should pray that God will speak to us in words that may defy logic, but words that we will bring to fruition, words that will lead us to the future unconcerned with what others may think or say.

Thank God Joseph was a dreamer who heard God's voice and who forged ahead to marry Mary and adopt the Messiah, Jesus, Emmanuel. Thanks be to God Joseph didn't decide to ask too many questions when he awoke. Thank God Joseph took God at his word.

May we always be as open to God's word as was Joseph. May we also recognize God's voice and follow him faithfully. Who knows what may come as we strive to be his disciples in our world today, disciples who refuse to let the uncertainty that surrounds us define us and lead us to inactivity.

Thanks be to God.
Amen