

Queen Street East Presbyterian Church
"The First Christmas"

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

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In the Matthew account that we read today, Joseph was portrayed as a man who found himself between a rock and hard place and yet made the most compassionate and ultimately faithful decision that he could, given the circumstances.

By the time Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he was likely already beginning to be the target of shaming in the community.

It was the normal marriage practice to legalize the marriage (which would have been arranged between their families) and then establish the household. So a couple would be legally married for some time before they would sleep together in their new home (this is why betrothed is a better translation than engaged to describe where the relationship of Joseph and Mary was at this time.).

During this time, Mary the bride-to-be would continue living among the women of her family. Since there is a communal element to the ritual washing required of Jewish women around their monthly periods, there would likely have been some murmuring about not seeing Mary at the baths in a while.

In the strict patriarchal system of that time, Joseph is the one who holds the cards. The honor code of his world requires that he not take what properly belongs to another. So even believing the child as belonging to God leaves Joseph in a bind.

So thinking that there is a man who is responsible, Joseph decides the more compassionate path is to quietly divorce Mary, giving the true father of the child a chance to accept responsibility and marry Mary.

But then something happens, Joseph comes to believe that God had a hand in bringing life into Mary's womb. For Joseph, this would require that he accept the social cost of becoming a father.

Keeping Mary as his wife, agreeing to raise a child that wasn't his, makes Joseph the true father in the eyes of the community. He doesn't make excuses or hide behind the law. He digs deep into compassion to find that justice is not about retribution but restoration. He commits to the restoration of love and fairness by becoming a devoted father and husband even when he didn't have to.

It's a good lesson next time we have been wronged by someone and think that it is "well within your rights," the next time you want to hurt others in response to the pain they may have caused us...remember Joseph acted.

Some of you for one reason or the other cannot be here on Wednesday night for the Christmas Eve service, so let me give you a preview of the sermon for that evening: "The First Christmas".

I begin by sharing some of the issues around the Christmas stories in the Gospels.

The angel Gabriel comes to the young woman, a virgin called Miryam (Mary) and tells her she will conceive without the involvement of a human father. Prophets foretell such a birth, and even its location in Bethlehem, despite Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth. A special star moves with precision to lead wisemen or astrologers from the east to the place of Jesus's birth. Angels sing in the night sky to shepherds. A king orders all newborn males to be killed. These are the themes we find in Christmas cards, hymns, manger scenes, concerts, and Christmas pageants.

Today people tend to treat the story like a fable. Some will go as far as saying that none of these things really happened at least not in the way they are described in the biblical narratives. There was no angel, no virginal conception, no special star, or wisemen from the East visiting the infant Jesus, or angelic choirs filling the night with glory as they sang to shepherds.

Biblical scholars tell us that these stories (as with other stories in the Bible) were not intended to be "factual" in the sense of reporting what actually happened. Rather, the Jesus Narratives are early Christian testimony, written roughly a hundred years after Jesus's birth. What they do is to proclaim the significance of this person Jesus (or Yeshua) in the lives and experiences of his people.

Just because they may not have happened the way they were written about does not mean they are not true.

For us living 2000 years after all of this happened who are looking to appreciate the first christmas, it helps to ask questions like: What do we know about how life was like back then? What was Palestine like in the first century of the Common Era? We are told that it was for the most part a country of peasants who worked the land and fishermen and artisans.

People were either poor or less poor. There really was no middle class like we know it today. So it is fair to say that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were poor. That explains why they ended up on a stable. They have strong cultural values around honor and shame.

And they had laws and they had severe punishments. They seem to have a very keen sense of the miraculous.(You know, as we said some Sundays back that here **at Queen East we do not believe in miracles, we depend on them!.**)

Through the centuries of Western Christianity, people have created representations of that first Christmas. Many of our hymns. Christmas cards, Christmas carols and pageants, films and art carry representations. Since many of them were done by Europeans, even Mary and Joseph and Jesus as well were made to look like Europeans.

So today as we revisit these representations, we sometimes get a sense of “No, this can’t be”. How is it that Mary always looks so fresh and calm in those blue and white robes. We can ask ourselves how might a peasant woman in Palestine look like that night as she sits on a stable giving birth without the benefit of epidural anaesthesia.

Then there’s Joseph, doing some kind of man-thing. He’s usually portrayed as off to the side — holding a lantern or a large stick. And he also looks totally composed.

And there’s the baby Jesus with a full head of hair, wide-open eyes and arms outstretched like he’s ready to belt out a song or wanting to embrace the world.

If we revisited the manger today, and if we were going to do our own representations of it, given that many of the people in our congregation come from the Global South, maybe we might come up with a different picture altogether.

Mary can be presented as just recovering from a painful labor full of sweat and blood. We are not told if there were any midwives around. Maybe, maybe not. Regardless, I think it is fair to say that It is unlikely that Mary’s face would be clean and serene.

And Joseph — If he were like me, by now he would likely look like a nervous wreck, after everything he’s been through. Not sure his hand could hold that lantern without shaking a bit.

And our newborn baby Jesus. If he is like other infants we’ve seen, he’s probably red-faced and screaming when hungry or uncomfortable. Occasionally those eyes would be clenched closed and they say heads of newborn babies tend to a bit odd-shaped from all the squeezing?

It should be obvious then upon deeper reflection that our images of the First Christmas have been sanitized and romanticized. We’ve successfully removed all traces of blood and sweat and tears and pain and goo until it no longer looks real. We’ve left out all the messy parts. The “...oh-my-God-what-now?” parts. The “I’m-screaming-as-loud-as-I-can-because-it-really-hurts parts”. The oh-no-I’ve-stepped-on some doo-doo parts.

The typical manger scenes paint a very different story from how a birth in a stable might look like back then. The stories tell of a young couple that's been disgraced by questions about the baby's father. The grand moment comes in a place nobody would choose to bring a baby into the world. A bunch of shepherds are the first to hear the news. Dirty shepherds — among the lowest people in their society. Religious outcasts because they couldn't observe the purity rituals while working in the fields. They can't come to church even if they wanted to.

And this baby grows into a man who hangs out with all these people rejected by his society. These are the ones that the religiously observant elite called sinners. Poor people. Dirty people. Rough people. All sorts of social and economic outcasts.

From these people starting with a bunch of fishermen, a global movement call Christianity will come about.

And that's what every Christmas should remind us: In the words of the messenger Nothing is impossible with God.

So let's work through that again: Mary is not a calm-faced mother and Joseph is not a lantern-toting dad and Jesus is not a perfect baby who doesn't cry and is always stretching out its arms to the world.

They were ordinary people like ourselves. Their bodies bled and they suffered pain. Like us in moments of stress, they too were barely holding it together.

So why don't we give ourselves permission to replace these figures with something more real. And the question that pops up is: Like what? And my answer to that is Like us, like you, like me.

Because like we say every Sunday. Every story we read and preach is our story. It is about us.

Christmas is about us as much as it is about Jesus Mary and Joseph and the entire cast of characters in those Christmas narratives.

We are reminded over and over again that we are "beloved of God" and like Mary "we are full of grace" and we are blessed so we can become a blessing. We are met by God during those moments when we feel totally broken. God kisses us during our painful moments making us feel that we are not alone. Our God is Emmanu-el: God with us. .

Like the dirty shepherds who were invited to see for christchild, or the rough fishermen who were called to be his followers and friends, or the young couple who found themselves parents of this child without a clear explanation of how it will all come

together that night, we are all part of an ongoing and never-ending process that we call Christmas. .

So go ahead. Take your place in the manger scene. You belong there. We all do. And yes, how about we offer to hold the baby for a while. Maybe his parents will be grateful for the break. It's been a long night. And while we can agree that it is holy, it was not a silent night in Bethlehem.

Tonight may our hearts become Bethlehem: places where our God is busy being born. May your Christmas be happy. Better yet, may it be real. As together we look beyond received interpretations of Christmas and create new meanings for ourselves.

Merry Christmas! Amen.