

God With Us – 4:Bringing Love
Matthew 1:18 - 25
December 18, 2022
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

This is the first year that the Washington, D.C. NFL team has been called the Commanders. For 87 years, they were the Redskins, a name that was disparaging to Native Americans and so, two years ago, they began the search for a new name. For those two years, they were simply “the Washington Football Team.” According to ESPN, team leaders had stressed that the franchise would like to incorporate the military into the new name because of its connection to the nation’s capital. Commander is a term used most often in the military as a naval officer rank, but it also can be used as a generic term. Team president, Jason Wright said, “It’s something that embodies the values of service and leadership that characterizes” the D.C. region. Service and leadership are good qualities, for sure. But not everyone loves the new name. One reason is, teams need a good nickname, but what can you call the Commanders? The “Commies”? Don’t think so. And Commanders doesn’t really connect to the Washington region, aside from the military personnel in the area. Clearly, the best team names have clear and strong connections to their regions. For example, the Washington Nationals are in the nation’s capital, the Pittsburgh Steelers reflect the city’s steel mill tradition, and then of course, there’s the Minnesota Vikings, which is a nod to the prominent Scandinavian American culture of Minnesota.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Matthew, it’s all about the names. Matthew, writing to first century Jews, goes to great lengths to present Jesus as the rightful heir to the royal Davidic dynasty. Here the birth of Jesus is foretold, and his genealogy ends with, “Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary - of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.” Biblically knowledgeable readers will connect this “Jacob was the father of Joseph” with an earlier “Jacob the father of Joseph” back in Genesis. That original Jacob had twelve sons, one of whom is the son of his beloved wife, Rachel, the famous Joseph - perhaps best known for his amazing technicolor dream coat. That first Joseph dreamed dreams, was sold by his brothers into slavery, was delivered to Egypt, survived the enticements of Potiphar’s wife, and eventually rescued not only his family but all of Egypt from famine. That first Joseph died in Egypt, but he too returned to his home when Moses took Joseph’s bones with him just as Joseph had made Israel’s sons promise him.

Knowing this ancient story, Matthew’s readers might anticipate that the second Joseph, son of Jacob, will dream dreams too, take his family to Egypt to protect them, and return to the land of Israel. So, let’s take some time and get to know this second Joseph a little better because it was this Joseph who completed the prophecy for love to come down that first Christmas.

This Joseph was a carpenter, we think, or maybe a stoneworker. The word is tricky to translate but we know he worked with his hands. Hard, backbreaking work, pounding out a living in the desert of Galilee, finding his way in the hot sun and the hard granite and the skinny trees. Think of him mending fishermen’s boats or fixing doors, wearing beat up work boots, with a hammer in the sling of his jeans. It was a hard life, a life where righteousness is shown not in words but in actions. He was a man of strength and purpose. The kind of guy who could fix things. The kind of guy who snow blows his own driveway and then takes care of the next-door neighbors’, too. This Joseph was engaged to Mary but it appeared that Mary was already pregnant. Engagement at that time was a legally binding contract between families, not a romantic relationship based on love. Unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was considered adultery and, according to the ancient law (Deut. 20:7) as punishable by death by stoning. But by the

time of Mary and Joseph, rabbinical teaching had softened and was calling for a less severe punishment. At the very least, adultery was grounds for breaking the engagement because it brought shame to both families. The fact that Mary was already pregnant gave Joseph the right to reject her publicly. However, we read that he had already made up his mind not to put her through that ordeal of public disgrace but instead, dismiss her quietly, no public stink, no demands for money. In verse 19, Matthew calls Joseph righteous. His righteousness came not from seeking to obey the law, nor his pursuit of justice. It was because of his compassion and mercy that lead Matthew to call him a righteous man. I have to wonder why Joseph thought this was the best path to take. Was it because he thought Mary was in love with someone else. Since he resolved to engage the legal process quietly, likely he was concerned for her reputation. Perhaps he loved her. Either way, he had compassion for her.

But then, one night, Joseph's plan was called into question when an angel of God appeared to him in a dream (of course) and instructed him to name the child, Jesus, a Greek form of Joshua, which was a common Hebrew name derived from the word, *yasha*, which means, "he saves". Then the angel told Joseph that this birth would fulfill the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah concerning the birth of a son born to a virgin to be named Emmanuel, of "God with us." In other words, this Child would be The Messiah.

So, what does it mean to say that the Son of God is named both *Jesus* and *Emmanuel*? Both names embody who Jesus is: Savior and God-with-us. Both invite us to respond with deep faith and commitment. The first name, Jesus, means he will save his people from their sins. Israel was living in exile because of its sins. The coming of Jesus Christ marked the end of the exile, not the physical exile but the spiritual exile, because through Him, God would forgive God's people. Jesus has been sent to earth to be the One to save us from all the sins and shortcomings that fracture our relationships with God and the people around us. We can make such a mess of our lives, as individuals and as communities, and so we need to be rescued. Jesus does this by offering us forgiveness for our past failings, and guidance for the path that lies ahead. We sing about his saving work in the carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"
O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.

Cast out our sin — that's the work of a Savior. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus came to "remove sin by the sacrifice of himself" on the cross. Jesus casts out our sins, once and for all, in an act that never needs to be repeated. He laid down his life for us in an act of loving sacrifice, one that brings us forgiveness and new life. He did for us what we can never do for ourselves, no matter how hard we try. Each of us is like an addict who discovers that recovery requires turning to a higher power — a power greater than ourselves. When we put our faith in Jesus the Savior, we find that forgiveness and change are possible. Salvation means that there is respite from whatever oppresses in the community that hears, and lives, this gospel. Men and women, slave and free people, all come together to say, In our midst, we have a savior.

Emmanuel, the second name, communicates that God is with us. Turning to a higher power also helps us discover that we are not alone. With Emmanuel in our lives, we are never alone. Using the words of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" again: *We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us; abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.* Jesus came to abide with us, to live with us, to stay with us forever. That's the work of Emmanuel, God with us. That's the work of love.

So, Joseph woke up from his dream and was forced to reconsider how he was going to live his life. In a recent blog post, Pastor Emily Kegal wonders if Joseph might have asked:

What now?

Do I follow the law, and end the engagement?

Do I disobey tradition?

Do I forget my religion?

Do I dare question the practices of my elders, passed down over thousands of years?

Do I risk shame and scandal, taking an uncertain path, becoming an outcast, accepting the rejection of my family and the laughter of my friends, putting myself even farther to the fringes of society, because I think that what just happened to me was more than just a dream?

What do you do when the truth runs counter to your whole life? What do we do when we come to the edge of everything we know and finally have to say:

“I love you.”

“I can’t live like this.”

“I quit.”

“I’m gay.”

“I’m going back to school.”

“I need help.”

“You have hurt me too much.”

“It’s over.”

How do we speak the truth, in that moment, when it seems like the whole world speaks against it – when we know it will turn our lives upside down?

Kegal says something in us has this strange and unexplainable sense that the truth is bigger than our fear. Something in us is plucked, like a string on a violin, when the angel says, “Do not be afraid.” Because Joseph knew in his heart that what he’d seen in his dream was more than just a dream, he trusted. And we can trust, even when the truth seems unbelievable. *Especially* when the truth seems impossible, and yet we know it to be true.

And so, Joseph married Mary and named the child. Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that decision to name Jesus, Joseph embraced both. Naming a child in the ancient Mediterranean world was a significant act on the part of the father. In naming the child, Joseph officially acknowledged the infant as his own legitimate child and adopted Jesus as his own son. He accepted Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost.

The miracle of the Christmas story is that God came to earth, and in that story, there are a hundred smaller ones, tucked in like straw in a manger, and one of those is that Joseph said yes.

Yes, marrying Mary.

Yes to naming his son.

Yes to being the stepfather to God.

Yes to the whispers and judgment.

Yes to having a son who would always be more than a carpenter.

Yes to the son whose ministry he did not know and would not live to see.

Yes to the messiness of God.

Yes to his life turned upside down.

And sometimes we find ourselves there too. Sometimes, truth breaks into our lives, and we have the opportunity to say, “yes”. In that moment, at the edge of everything we know, we fall into the truth, because it is bigger than us. Because what that truth has the power to do is to break through our fear and our pain and drop us into this deep cradle of love and mercy.

I've shared before some of the story around my dad's open heart surgery in December of 2011 to replace his mitral valve, for the second time. What the surgeon didn't know until hours into the surgery was that my dad's arteries were so calcified that it was nearly impossible for the new valve to be sewn on. The surgeon tried everything he could think of to make those lifesaving stitches, breaking several needles in the process until he finally resorted to using a power drill to make the holes through which the needle could pass. By doing this, he successfully sewed the valve on, but my dad was on the heart and lung machine for hours longer than was safe. The result was that his lungs were never the same and over the next three and half years, they continued to diminish and decay until he passed in June of 2015. During those 3 years, I would visit my folks in San Diego as often as I could. Each time before I left, my dad would pull me aside, usually as I was saying goodnight to him in his hospital bed in their office and thinking it might be the last time he'd see me, he'd say, "You're my favorite daughter, but don't tell your sisters." Now, I have two sisters and we talk often and so it didn't take us long to discover that he told all three of us the same thing whenever we visited but we never told dad that we knew. We didn't find this dishonest or deceitful. Dad truly loved each of us so much and this was the best way he knew how to express it.

And you know what? That is how much God loves you, the most. You are God's favorite. And God calls you Beloved. And so, Beloved, remember at those moments when your life, when like Joseph, things seem to be turning upside down, God is with you, sometimes in the smallest of ways – a flicker of light – a warm glimmer of hope in the cold, or in a tiny baby born to an unwed mother and a righteous, humble man.

Let us pray: Ever-loving God, who brought forth in this world the very image of yourself on a winter's day over 2,000 years ago, we give you our praise and thanks that this gift still lives in us today. Bethlehem, the city of David, is our eternal reminder that you are with us and among us, that you did not and will not abandon your people, and that you have shown us a way to live and a way to love. Let all who feel lonely and without meaning or hope today, discover the Christ child as Emmanuel. Let all who feel busy and preoccupied pause at the manger to experience God with us. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 18, 2022

Daily Prayer: Loving God, your mercy and compassion endure forever. Open my heart, that I may receive your love; and following the example of your Son, love one another. Through Jesus Christ, who loved us to the end. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-19

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Observation: The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew's gospel is seen through the eyes of Joseph; in Luke's gospel, we see it through Mary's. No attempt is made to bring them into line. The central fact is the same; but instead of Luke's picture of an excited Galilean girl, learning that she is to give birth to God's Messiah, Matthew shows us the more sober Joseph, discovering that his fiancée is pregnant. Matthew didn't have to say Joseph didn't believe Mary. That was clear—Joseph was ready to call off the betrothal.

Application: This was probably an arranged marriage (Joseph in Bethlehem, Mary in Nazareth). Even if they were both in Nazareth, in conservative Galilean families the couple could not be together alone before the wedding, so Joseph may not have known Mary very well. What would you have thought if you had been Joseph as Mary told you she was having a baby, not by another man, but by the Holy Spirit? Are there faith issues that leave you with serious belief questions today?

Prayer: Lord God, you created what we call the “natural order of things.” You usually work through that, yet not always. Keep me open to all the natural or exceptional ways you may choose to work in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-19

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Observation: Personally painful as he found Mary's pregnancy, Joseph maintained a concern for her well-being and safety. If he denounced her publicly, she might even be stoned to death, as the law in Deuteronomy said. But although some lynchings may have occurred in secret, they were rare, so Mary likely faced divorce rather than death. Even there, Joseph sought the least hurtful solution— sensitive to her shame, he prefers a private divorce.

Application: Matthew reported something important even before Joseph met the angel in a dream: “*Joseph her husband was a righteous man...he didn't want to humiliate her.*” What do you learn about Joseph's inner qualities from his refusal to humiliate Mary? Henry Cloud and John Townsend wrote the Biblically based book, *Safe People*, a study of the qualities of “safe people.” Joseph, even perplexed and hurt, was a safe person. How alike are you to Joseph in being a “safe” person for others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your earthly father's “righteous” character didn't demand following “the law” to the letter but showed mercy to Mary. Help my righteousness, too, to always lean in the direction of mercy. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Scripture: Matthew 1:20, 2:13

As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.”

Observation: The name Joseph came from a great man in Israel's history. Genesis 37, 39-50 told that first Joseph's story. He was the patriarch Jacob's favorite son (born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel). He grew from a spoiled child into a man of reliable integrity, and Egypt's king

finally trusted him to save Egypt (and Jacob's family) from a great famine. (You might remember him because of his amazing technicolor dream coat.) Interpreting dreams, an ability he always credited to God, played a key role in the rise of Joseph's historic namesake (cf. Genesis 41:15-16).

Application: How did your parents (or you) choose your name? Did it come, at least in part, from an admired person, either in your own family or in history? If so, what qualities does that name link you to? If you've chosen to identify as a "Christ-ian," what qualities does that name invite God to work into your character as you face life's challenges and opportunities? In what ways do you want people to remember your "name" (whether it began as famous or obscure)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, someone else got to choose the name I got at birth. But I get to choose what kind of person that name identifies. Help me, like both the famous and obscure Josephs, to be known for living with the kind of character you offer all people. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Scripture: Matthew 1:20-21

As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Observation: In a dream, an angel told Joseph to believe Mary and to proceed with the marriage plans. Joseph found himself, unexpectedly, in a story much bigger than just one couple's marriage. The angel said to name the child "Jesus" (the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua," which meant "Yahweh is salvation"). Many Hebrews wanted salvation from the occupying Roman army, but the angel didn't mention the Romans. This child, he said, would save people from humanity's greatest enemy: sin.

Application: Scholar N. T. Wright wrote that "Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to but could not of itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the 'exile' they have suffered not just in Babylon but in their own hearts and lives." How confident are you that Jesus can, in fact, save you from any life missteps, and that he is the savior from sin that we all need?

Application: Joseph was a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege—siring his first-born son—in order to obey God's will. There's a song by Skip Ewing, "It Wasn't His Child", that says "like a father [Joseph] was strong and kind and good....But it wasn't his child; it was God's child." Have you had to give up some cherished dream to obey God? Might you ever have to? How can you and God bend any such loss to a positive end?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, though I sometimes forget it, I need a savior. Thank you for coming to be that savior. Redeem my inner and outer way of life from sin, that I may walk daily in your light. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Scripture: Matthew 1:22-23

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel.*

Observation: Isaiah 7:1-14 told of two neighboring kings plotting against Ahaz, the king of Judah. The prophet Isaiah told the worried king to ask for a sign that God was with him. The king defiantly refused. Isaiah said the sign was that a young woman would have a son. Scholar John Goldingay wrote, “We don’t know who the girl is—indeed, Isaiah doesn’t need to have a particular girl in mind. The point is that by the time a few months have passed, and the girl has had her baby, the crisis that preoccupies Ahaz will be over. In a few years the hostile kingdoms would lose their power (and they did). Matthew quoted Isaiah 7 to link Jesus with the name “Emmanuel” (“God with us” in both Hebrew and Greek). Matthew was not confused nor was he misinterpreting Isaiah...I think he was saying, Jesus, like that first Immanuel, was a sign sent by God that you might know God is with you, that you might know he will never leave you.

Application: Matthew 18:20 quoted Jesus: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” And in the gospel’s final verse, Jesus pledged that “I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age” (Matthew 28:20). What settings or practices help make God’s presence real to you? In what situations do you especially long for and value God’s presence with you?

Prayer: O Lord, on that first Christmas you came into our midst—human, but also more. Give me insight and humility as I take in the divine mystery that you were Emmanuel, “God with us.” Amen.

Saturday, December 24

Scripture: Matthew 1:24-25

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn’t have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Observation: Whether because he told the story from a man’s point of view, or perhaps simply because his sources gave little information, Matthew wrote almost no details about Jesus’ actual birth. His short account didn’t even identify where the birth took place until after the fact in Matthew 2:1. But he reported two key facts: despite his earlier reluctance, Joseph married the pregnant Mary. And he named her child “Jesus” (the Greek form of Joshua, which meant “God saves”), in keeping with the angelic direction in his dream.

Application: In Luke 1:38, Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” In Matthew 1:24 we read that Joseph “did just as an angel from God commanded.” Luke 2:48-52 told of 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple. His worried parents asked why he was there, not traveling home with them. Jesus replied, “Didn’t you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?” “My father’s house” clearly didn’t mean “Joseph’s house,” and the text implied that Joseph accepted that answer without protest. Neither Joseph or Mary could see it at the time, but today millions, perhaps billions of people worship on this day because two humble Hebrew peasants listened, believed, and obeyed. What is God calling you to listen to, to believe, and then to do or be this Christmas season?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the same openness to receive and live out your purpose that Joseph showed. Thank you for the carpenter's quiet, modest courage and determination to do what was right. Amen.