

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 22, 2018  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
**Advent: What Shall We Do?**

**Matthew 1:18–25 (NIV84)**

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some people in life are planners. They like to know the schedule for the day before the day begins. They like to have a plan for the week so they can be prepared on Monday for what is going to happen on Friday. Planners like to have the month and year mapped out so they know when the appointments are scheduled, when the project is due, when the vacation will happen. And some planners try to plan out decades of their life – what they will study in college, when they will be married, how many children they will have, where they will live and so on. Not many plans happen exactly like the planner hopes. Maybe that is why some people don’t make plans beyond what they are going to do in the next two hours. There is always something that will interrupt even our best plans.

Joseph seems to be a planner. He had worked hard at his carpentry and was now able to support a wife and family. A beautiful young woman named Mary had agreed to be his bride. They were engaged. In those days and in the Jewish culture, engagement was a bigger commitment than in our culture. Engagement today is a verbal agreement between a man and a woman to get married in the future. This promise could be broken by either party simply deciding that they do not want to get married. But in Jewish culture of that time, the only way to break off an engagement was to get a formal divorce decree. Joseph and Mary were going to be married unless something drastic interrupted them.

What would you be thinking if you were Joseph about to be married? Maybe you are thinking of the joy of being married and the wedding feast that will soon happen. Maybe you are planning for Mary to move to your home, getting things just right. Maybe you are dreaming about children and making some furniture for your own son or daughter. Maybe he dreamed about one day teaching his son how to build things with his hands and passing on the family business. There were plans but something drastic

interrupted.

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Now, what are you thinking if you are Joseph? He has to be crushed. Every plan is ruined. All of his dreams for the future are gone. There will be no wedding. There will be no child. There will be no wife. What should he do? The only solution Joseph can come up with is divorce. But he still cares for Mary and wants to divorce her quietly. He does not want to get revenge on her for betraying him. He does not want her to suffer even though he is suffering.

What do we do when our life and our plans are interrupted? A toddler throws a tantrum and throws anything within his grasp. Maybe you have grown beyond the toddler, tantrum phase and just get mad at the world when your plans don't happen. Things don't go well at school or at work and everyone better stay out of my way because I'm mad! We don't know who to blame for our rotten day so we blame everyone. Or perhaps we know who to blame and we try to make their life miserable. Or we just dream about making their life miserable. We often fall into sins of thought, word and action when our life plans are interrupted.

While Joseph is called a righteous man for not seeking to harm Mary for getting pregnant before they were married, he is not a perfect man. Divorcing her was not the answer and not God's plan.

### **Do Not Be Afraid**

*But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

Do not be afraid. This is often the message of angels. The shepherds were afraid when the angel appeared in the night sky. Mary was troubled when Gabriel appeared to her. Joseph was already troubled by all that had happened and this angel of the Lord gives him the same message. Do not be afraid. But the angel attaches instructions for Joseph to complete and not be afraid to do. He is not to divorce Mary but is to go ahead with the marriage! Won't people suspect something if they get married while Mary is pregnant? Won't that expose Mary to public disgrace? And how could Joseph get married to a woman who was not faithful to him?

Do not be afraid is the angel's message, for the Child is no ordinary child. Mary was not unfaithful. This is the Child of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. This is the Child promised by the prophets. This Child who has interrupted your life will save people from their sins. Joseph's questions are answered. His confusion is cleared. His doubts erased. This is what Christ's birth does for us too.

For Christ came to forgive all our short tempered responses after a bad day. Christ came to forgive our

tantrums when we didn't get our way. Christ came to give us hope when it seems that the world is against us. Christ was born to be the Savior we need. Therefore we do not need to be afraid any more. Christ is born. Our Savior is here.

### **Take Jesus into your home**

What does Joseph do now that he is not afraid, now that he knows Mary's Child is his Savior? He does what the angel tells him to do: *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Joseph was given the responsibility to raise the Son of God, the Savior of the world. What if he messed up? What if he didn't protect Jesus and something happened to him? What if he wasn't smart enough to teach Jesus correctly? How would he handle raising a Child who never sinned? What if people gossip about Mary because she is pregnant before marriage. There are a lot of what if's for Joseph to consider. But with the gospel message ringing in his ears from the angel, he takes Mary and the soon to be born Son of God into his home. For this Child is now the center of his life.

So what shall we do with this Christmas message that Jesus has been born? We can't do exactly what Joseph and take mother and Child into our home, but we can take Jesus into our home and lives. Our Lord gives parents the awesome responsibility of raising their children in the Christian faith, to pass on the good news of Christ's birth, death and resurrection to our children. Take Jesus into your homes and lives by talking about Jesus often when you are in church and at home. Make your Advent and Christmas celebrations centered on Christ and his birth as Savior. Take some time to think about the other traditions you may have. Are these proclaiming Jesus' name, Savior, or are the traditions hiding Jesus and his name? This world is pushing Jesus out of Christmas more and more.

I've seen lists of favorite Christmas movies lately. Out of dozens of movies, a very few have anything at all to do with Christ's birth. I think "Home Alone" is a fun movie and it does have scenes in a church with actual Christmas music, it does not tell the story of Christ's birth. Even the classic, "A Christmas Carol", misses the birth of Christ as Savior and instead uses guilt to change Scrooge's ways. The only one that clearly tells of Jesus' birth on any popular list is "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Linus recites Luke, chapter 2. Popular culture is not going to bring Jesus into your home.

So what shall we do? We bring Jesus into our homes and lives. We make the birth of Jesus the most important part of the Christmas season. We are not afraid to reject traditions that push Christ away. We are not afraid to boldly proclaim that Christ, our Savior is born. And we don't put Christ away when the tree goes down on Epiphany. Our Savior remains the center of our lives the rest of the year. He is the reason for every season of life. Christ is the one we run to whenever we are confused and whenever we need forgiveness. Therefore he is part of our daily life. So when this world interrupts your plans, you have one constant, one unchanging rock upon which to lean. You have the Child born to Mary, Jesus our Savior.

Amen.