

DO WE STILL NEED A SAVIOR?

Matthew 1:18-25

A group of expectant fathers were in a waiting room, while their wives were in the process of delivering babies. A nurse came in and announced to one man that his wife had just given birth to twins. “That’s quite a coincidence” he responded, “I play for the Minnesota Twins!” A few minutes later another nurse came in and announced to another man that he was the father of triplets. “That’s amazing,” he exclaimed, “I work for the 3M company.” At that point, a third man slipped off his chair and laid down on the floor. Somebody asked him if he was feeling ill. “No,” he responded, “I work for the 7-up company.”

While Joseph certainly did not have to deal with this kind of challenge, he was nonetheless faced with the overwhelming news of the pregnancy of his betrothed. I am certain you have heard through the years that in those days, a betrothal was considered to be tantamount to a marriage, hence the need for Joseph to bring divorce proceedings against Mary. Her pregnancy was for him, a huge violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman. I believe that many of us really do not realize just what a scandal the incarnation and the virgin birth really were. We live in a society today, where it is not only fairly commonplace for a bride to be in the “family way,” many couples have a child or two before even becoming husband and wife. Consequently, Joseph’s response before his dream really was truly compassionate and kind. “Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (v. 19). Joseph, (*her husband*), planned to separate from her discretely when he could have shamed her in public and even had her stoned, and would have been completely within his rights in doing so. (Homiletics online, 12/12/2019)

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, there is a moment when the entirety of God’s messianic plan rests in the hands of this simple man, Joseph, and in his willingness to adopt Jesus as his son. Unlike Luke, Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage back through Joseph’s side of the family – establishing Jesus as “the son of David” and “the son of Abraham” by virtue of being – legally – Joseph’s son. If Joseph had carried through his plans to “dismiss [Mary] quietly” (v. 19) when he discovered she was already pregnant, not only would Jesus have been illegitimate in the eyes of his culture, but, according to Matthew, he would have been without the validity of a Davidic heritage, which would not fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah 11 which we looked at in my sermon for the second Sunday of Advent: *But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.*

The stump imagery suggests the bankruptcy of the monarchy as embodied in the historical kings, along with the need for a new beginning, to spring from the very origin from which David and his dynasty arose. Jesse: David’s father.

This story should be helpful to all of us because it highlights that sometimes the faithful thing to do and the faithful way to be are sometimes at odds with social convention. Joseph did not violate convention to be politically rebellious or even to prove his own inherent goodness. He violated convention and remained faithful to Mary because God, as God often does, intervened in an unexpected way! This is the message a part of this text brings – that unexpected things,

things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work, which happened in the following illustration.

It all began with one woman selling textiles from the trunk of her car. Her name was Edna Ruth Byler – wife, mother and unexpected entrepreneur.

As a volunteer living in Akron, Pennsylvania, in the 1940s, Byler became known in the Mennonite community for her warm hospitality, creative spirit and cinnamon rolls.

In 1946, when Byler traveled with her husband to Puerto Rico, she met women in La Plata Valley who were struggling to feed their children. Having lived through hard times herself during the Depression, she knew the face of poverty. She also knew the importance of dignity and people wanting a way to help themselves.

Byler was moved to do something. She saw the pieces of fine embroidery the women of La Plata created, but had no place to sell. If she, an American, was so struck by these unique textiles, perhaps other Americans would also appreciate their beauty. With no clear plan, but a sense of purpose, Byler brought the pieces home and began to sell to friends and neighbors.

By the 1950s, she was driving her Chevy II packed with global needlework to women's sewing circles and parties of interested friends across the country. She shared the stories of the makers, describing how each purchase meant that a woman gained economic independence and a chance to give her family a brighter future. It was a simple idea. But a pioneering one that would launch Ten Thousand Villages and blossom into a global fair-trade movement. My checkbook cover is only one example of the kind of work one can find at Ten Thousand Villages. God worked wonders out of Ruth Byler's unconventional response to the poverty in La Plata.

Whenever I get too caught up in planning the 'perfect' Christmas with every treasured decoration in its' rightful place, presents all purchased and wrapped BEFORE Christmas eve candlelight service, mounds of cookies and dozens of yeast rolls, hot fudge sauce, and cranberry orange pound cake making Vern drool in anticipation; AND don't forget a spotlessly clean home, I think of that first Christmas where preparations were neither conventional or proper. Of course, I cannot remember the last time I was ever successful in executing my fantasy of a perfect Christmas – still re-orienting my perspective – as I focus on the birth account in the gospels helps. It also helps me in that I am reminded that life is not about perfection, but about becoming the person God wants me to become. You know that old cartoon showing the path a person believed their lives would take – that straight line from point "A" to point "B," when in reality the line is all squiggles and curly q's! Usually it is in the twists and turns that the most growth in life occurs; for when I finally realize that without God nothing is as it should be, it is that moment when I am willing to admit that I really need a Savior. While a typical evangelist might preach that Jesus saves us from sin and death, I am more inclined to add that I also need a Savior to save me from myself.

Every year we are on a journey during the season of Advent. Each year we travel expectantly with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem where we will meet the wee babe in the manger. For me, it never grows old, because each year I am given the chance to remember and refresh my faith, and if necessary, begin back at square one. Each year I remember the first time I met Baby

Jesus in the manger, and I picture the little girl sitting in her father's office feet dangling high above the floor. And without fail, I remember what it felt like to be told-the wonder and awe that Baby Jesus was coming for me as if I were the most important person in the world. And...Baby Jesus comes for you and you....and you.

Certainly, there are some very happy and contented people around who believe they have all they need. They have a good income, they love their families, and they enjoy life in general. This is fine as far as it goes. And then the day comes when the rug is pulled out from under your feet and you wonder – Why was I created? What is the purpose of my being here? Is life on earth all that there is? If you have ever found yourself in this place, than you know you need more from your life. Even the most contented humanist will be restless if he or she ever asks, “What is my life really all about?” This, my friends, is the beginning of knowing why we need a savior. (Feasting on the Word, year A, volume 1, page 95.)

The fruit Adam and Eve ate in the garden from the Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil, so they could become like God, hence equal with God, still shows up in our lives today. Each and every time you and I try to minister to ourselves rather than allow the Savior to minister to us we have essentially told God we know better. Some people choose to minister to themselves through chemical dependency, others through acquiring money, shopping, gambling, addiction to work...The Advent season asks us, “So, how is that working for you?” What do you think; do we still need a Savior?

Author Lee Strobel once asked Middle Eastern scholar and former atheist Dr. Michael Brown, “Who's the real Jesus to you?” From *The Case for Christmas*, “Brown glanced off to the side, collecting his thoughts, and then looked back at me. ‘He's the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. He's the one to whom I owe my life and through him I have come to know God. He is the one who provided me with complete forgiveness of sins, who loved me when I was a miserable, ungrateful, rebellious, proud wretch. He put a new heart and a new spirit within me. He turned my life around and gave it meaning. And he is the only hope for the world.’”

By this point in the month of December, it may be too late to buy the perfect Christmas present for a friend or family member. But it is not too late to accept the unexpected gift that God is offering you – the gift of Jesus as Immanuel, Savior, Messiah and Lord.

All you need to do is accept it and allow Jesus to go to work in your life, in surprising and transformative ways.