

December 18, 2022
Fourth Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

“Scandalous Love”

A myriad of images spring to mind when we think of **Christmas**. Almost all of them positive. Our text today reminds us that Christmas comes as a *mixed package*. But we already knew that. The number of people in our faith community who have said good-bye to loved ones who have died this year alone is stunning. The first Christmas after a family member’s death can be especially tough – and there is always a sense of absence around the table each year.

We don’t do ourselves or anyone else any favors to insist that Christmas may only be *a pristine experience of joy*. *It rarely comes in that flavor*. Even when so many of the flavors of the season are positive – and we will take them - ***the incarnation of God in the world is never quite what we expected***.

Today’s text focuses on Joseph. Joseph who can never be nominated for anything but *“best supporting actor”* because Jesus and Mary are always the headliners. We aren’t sure Matthew even needed to take the time to speak of Joseph...which is precisely why we need to hear it.

Today’s passage, not unlike the genealogy before it, is perhaps most important for reminding us ***we are easily scandalized by the things of God***. If you take the time to peruse the family line given in Matthew, you will see some of those populating the family tree turn out to be *quite non-traditional - scandalous*.

Matthew follows that with a description of Jesus birth which *focuses on Joseph*. For those of us who want to get to the classic Christmas narrative, Matthew is frustrating. Not only are all the classic scenes we remember *from Luke’s Gospel* – but we don’t have the cultural lenses to catch the nuance in Matthew’s story.

Matthew wants us to know Jesus’ birth was special and planned by God for a long time. The scene opens with a righteous man betrothed to a young woman – we would call her a girl – and “before they lived together” she was “found to be with child.” The phrase, *“found to be with child”* – implies scandal, doesn’t it? If everything is as expected, we say – “She is going to have a baby” or “She is pregnant.” But this is a scandalous pregnancy. And people who knew this young couple would have said, *“I don’t know how that tramp could have betrayed such a*

good man like Joseph.” And Joseph was thinking – “I know she isn’t a tramp...but this pregnancy must mean betrayal and scandal.”

Have you ever wondered if there wasn’t some way God could have accomplished an entrance into the world ***without dragging Mary and Joseph through the mud?*** After all, *by God’s plan*, Jesus’ birth narrative starts with an inconvenient pregnancy and public scandal.

Joseph – as a man of faith – decided to minimize the price Mary would pay for betraying him - which could have been death. This is extraordinary. Let’s sit for a moment in the time of obvious betrayal and loss – we have all had a chance to feel betrayal and loss. And our normal human reaction is ***anger and a desire for revenge rooted in our pain.***

Joseph had the pain. He did not want revenge. It is, if you will, ***a Christmas miracle.*** A miracle we can *honor in Joseph and pray for in ourselves.* And when we do get to that dream scene, Joseph is reassured that Mary is all she seemed and now more, as a chosen instrument of God. And that’s great for Joseph. But no one else got the dream. Everyone else still has their mind on scandal. It turns out – ***God’s ways are not confined to our understanding or social convention.*** There were clear religious rules at the time which conflicted with how God chose to come into the world. This whole episode should caution us that ***God’s ways are often surprising*** and often call us to *new ways of being.*

In the end Matthew wants us to know Jesus comes to us through the line of King David of old. But the genealogy is Matthew’s, and the baby is Mary’s – so what does it matter? *It matters because God is always at work – over generations.* It matters because there is a *beautiful poetic turn* in that last phrase, ***“He named him Jesus.”*** In that moment, Joseph – the man of great faith – ***adopts into the family line*** the son he knows he did father. Wow! This is the wonder of the gospel. *Even as God offers us unmerited grace* in Jesus who is born. Jesus who is born of Mary receives the grace to be *adopted into David’s family line.*

Jesus *not only gives* - but also receives grace. It is a messy scandal ridden story on the heels of a scandalous family history – *and by the unmerited grace of God* – it is *all we could ever hope for*, for Christmas.