

Christmas 1—the First Sunday after Gal. 4 Matthew 1:18-25

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

In the early 1990’s a pop psychology writer with a PhD from a correspondence school published a book that spent 121 weeks on the New York Best Sellers List. The title, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, caught people with its suggestion that the genders are essentially from different worlds, or at the very least speak, hear, relate, and communicate in divergent languages. Mr. Gray’s thesis has come under considerable criticism, especially as we are watching the constant redefining of gender. However, it was clear from reactions to his book that many people found his suggestions mirrored in their own experience in relationships. I suspect diversity in communication and perspective is more complex than simple gender differences, but they do play a role.

Today, the First Sunday after Christmas (yes, in the 12 days of Christmas) we travel to a rather different view of Jesus’ birth than we had on the Eve of the Nativity. That evening we had Luke’s Gospel account with all its warmth and imagery. This morning we have Matthew’s rendering; it is a bit terse and tightly written. It has been suggested by a number of reputable scholars that Luke wrote trying to give Mary’s perspective. There is a constant note of receptivity and mulling on Mary’s part in Luke’s telling of the story. When Gabriel says, “Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you”, she is troubled and considers what this means. She says to him when he announces her condition, “How can this be...” but then, “Let it be with me according to your word”, and afterward we get the Magnificat. She receives the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy in advanced age with joy. Over and again we hear that she ‘ponders’ what she hears and witnesses and keeps these in her heart. In Luke’s account there is a note of engaging acceptance.

Matthew, on the other hand, is more direct and active. Again, it has been put forward that this is told to give an insight into the birth from Joseph’s view. He finds himself in a position in which he has to take action(s) in the midst of events that seem improbable, if not unimaginable. He has a couple of scandals on his hands and the first one leads straight to the second. He finds his espoused is pregnant, and the only immediate answer to that is she has been unfaithful. “Who have you been seeing? Is it anyone I know? How could you?” You can imagine what this must have seemed. Perhaps he would have liked to just walk away and get on with his life, but... He wishes to do the ‘just’, that is right thing under the law. Understand that in ancient Palestine marriage was set up differently from our culture and practice. It was normally an arranged relationship and comprised of two stages; the first engagement and the second when the two entered the male’s home and began life together. BUT, the only way out of an engagement was to issue divorce. It wasn’t a polite agreement where we decide not to proceed because second thoughts have occurred to us, we get cold feet, or a better deal has appeared!! Joseph is in a real fix, so don’t piously gloss over the stress and crisis we are hearing. Joseph has to take in the reality of their situation, and no matter how much he loved Mary and wanted to forgive her apparent indiscretion, he is bound by the law to divorce her—this is what the text means when it says he was a ‘just’ man, i.e. a man who held his religious duty deeply. The verdict of the law here was severe, and at best this would be a public event with all the local gossips gathered to enjoy the show-**yet justice is tempered by mercy**, and so he decides to divorce her privately as not to create humiliation. It may well be a sign of what the Messiah will bring to us all; “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” But even here the story takes another twist for Joseph; his intent is dissolved by the messenger (not a spiritual being or intermediary as we think of angels, but here it is more the presence of God discerned) who tells

him to move forward with Mary and then calls him “Son of David”. That title ties him to the whole history of Israel; to David as the height of leadership; to hope there will be a completion of the promises of the prophets and that a ruler who brings and is God’s peace will finally be with them, and us. Joseph is a striking figure. Like so many people over the centuries, he had to look deeply into unyielding events and through faith begin to grasp that he was part of something larger than himself; part of a drama where God was at work bringing divine presence into life, even when it seemed the last likely thing given the circumstances. (By the way this text is a bit of a footnote to verses 1-16 where we start with a ‘just man’, Abraham, and it closes with one, Joseph, and in between is an assortment of characters and reprobates. Joseph is a man who does not stop at the shallow end of the pool.

If we take these 2 variant accounts seriously, we will find ourselves encountering very real people with very real dilemmas trying in the midst of it all to find what it means to: 1. Recognize God’s activity among everyday events, and 2. Respond in a way that actively participates in God’s presence. While Matthew uses Isaiah 7, and the imagery of ‘the’ virgin (not a virgin-ho Parthenos); Joseph’s doubts and dream to point to God’s miraculous plan, it is really getting to who Jesus is that ultimately shows what that plan will look like. It is the naming of this child that takes center stage, and we get two immediate insights: Yeshua and Emmanuel. Jesus’ Hebraic name comes from Joshua. It was a very common name as Joshua was an heroic figure in Israel’s history. Except this “Joshua” will save his people from more than mortal enemies...he will save from sin. Emmanuel is merely the combination of two Hebrew words meaning “God with us”- **this is the second scandal in Joseph’s moments.-”God with us”**. Consider for a moment the ways in which that might be heard and meant. God with us could point to a moment or time of visitation recalling Jesus’ earthly incarnation over 33 years. It can also mean a series of events where God’s presence is felt or noticed, as in the Sacraments, or an encounter with a person who is sign of that presence. But it can also be a statement about commitment; about God’s faithfulness to stick to us—to be really ‘with’ us in this messy world of sin and loneliness and yearning for hope and love. What little we know of Joseph, and it is sketchy, it appears that he moved from simply being a just man to one who recognized the mercy of God in and through the birth of this unexplainable child. He saw God’s plan of salvation and wholeness, long and winding though it appeared, to be coming to focus in Jesus-Yeshua, and he acted on it in accepting and being a faithful spouse and father. The coming of the Messiah is indeed “for us” and an act of God being “with us”, but it is not solely a spectator event. It asks us to consider what we have witnessed and received during Christmas, and begin to identify how willing we are to allow Jesus to free us from sin and to remain the center of our way of living in this world. One of the unnerving aspects of having the God-Man who is really with us is that there is no place to hide our frailties, our sins, our lack of faith, or those places in our lives we wish no one else to see or know. The one who has come to save us can’t ignore the dark places we would like to avoid. His presence takes all of us—not only All meaning everyone, but all of each of us. Joseph had to come to the point where he trusted that God was more true, more faithful, more with us, than the doubts that must have haunted him.

Here we are a few days beyond the birth of a human child in a backwater town in Palestine. What could possibly come from such surroundings and such a set of circumstances? Perhaps Emmanuel—the one we most need. Amen+