

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Advent 4A
St Thomas, Medina
December 18, 2016
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Possibly Impossible

... but before they lived together, she was found to be with child. Hmmm.

We don't often remember this pesky little detail of the Christmas story. When we think of the Virgin Birth, I think we imagine it as a sort of a magical, mystical, miraculous thing, right? The notion of Mary being a virgin who says "yes" to God's desire to be born in her is something otherworldly and beautiful and pure. Sort of romantic, really. The whole thing is really beautifully romantic, isn't it? What do you think of when you think of the Virgin Birth? I imagine that most of us picture a quaint little stable – notice we don't call it a barn – in the little town of Bethlehem, lots of friendly beasts standing around, pawing the ground and warming the stable with their sweet alfalfa scented breath, young shepherds gathered all round, with baby lambs slung over their shoulders, a colossal glittering star overhead pointing the way for the Wise Ones, and the Virgin Mary gazing down at the sweetest ever baby boy, swaddled in white, cooing and lying in a manger.

... but before they lived together, she was found to be with child.

We tend to skip over these messy parts of the story, and that is a poverty, because the messy parts are the parts where we can find ourselves in the story. While it's true that the beauty of the Christmas story can never be diminished, the beauty is not to be found in a make believe quaint little stable in the quaint little town of Bethlehem, with the perfectly appointed manger and a perfectly dressed and coiffed mother. Seriously? Let's imagine what this was really like. It's cold. It's a barn. There are animals. Big animals. They are doing what big animals do. This is not a pretty picture. It's a mess. And yet it is a beautiful mess.

... but before they lived together, she was found to be with child. The whole thing started out as a mess. Just ask Joseph!

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. He was a good man, an honest man, a happy man betrothed to a beautiful young woman named Mary. He had finally found the woman of his dreams and was probably looking forward to settling down in Nazareth, growing his carpentry business and raising a family. The wedding was right around the corner, and just when it looked like everything was coming together perfectly, Joseph's fiancée Mary was found to be with child.... And the child she is found to be with, is apparently from the Holy Spirit. I beg your pardon?

Holy Spirit or not, this is an impossible situation, utterly unacceptable in that place and time. Mary and Joseph had a contract and Mary's pregnancy was not only a gross violation of that contract, Jewish law made it a crime punishable by death. And while the just and kindly Joseph

does his best to protect Mary from the worst that can happen by deciding to quietly and privately end their contract, he must have been totally torn up inside. Everything was so beautiful, so perfect, they had their whole lives in front of them, and in the utterance of one sentence, all of it disappears.

We know what this is like, don't we? "Mr. Jones, I'm calling about the results of your biopsy." "I'm sorry, I've fallen in love with someone else." "Ms. Anderson, we're holding your son in jail." "There's been an accident." In the blink of an eye, everything can change. And what is true is that God is in the midst of these terrifying times, just as God is in the midst of the beautiful times. We can pretend like the terrible times don't happen, just like we can pretend that what's expelled from bulls and donkeys is warm, sweet alfalfa breath. But hard things do happen, and when they happen we don't need to romanticize them. We don't need to push them away. And we surely don't need to give up. God is in all of it, and that is a promise. *"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."* God is always with us.

That's what the prophets foretold, and that's what the angel told Joseph in that amazing dream.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Do not be afraid. The angels of the Lord often lead with that phrase, and no wonder! Being in the presence of God's own Holy Messenger would be terrifying in and of itself, never mind the fact that when those messengers show up, they're usually offering up something that feels unexpected or even impossible. Surely that was true for Joseph. How could he possibly marry a woman who was pregnant with a child not his own? The law didn't allow it, his conscience didn't allow it, and yet...

Joseph awoke from his dream knowing what he would do. I don't think he simply forgot what a scandalous mess he was in. I imagine he knew that God was asking something unexpected and possibly even impossible of him. And still, Joseph chose to say "yes" to God. Just like Mary had, when the angel of the Lord appeared to her asking the impossible, Joseph said yes to God. It's usually Mary we think of when we think of the one who said "yes." But much was asked of Joseph too. He was faithful. In the face of certain social shunning, he remained faithful to Mary and faithful to God. And in the middle of what must have seemed the greatest disaster possible, he recognized God. You see, unexpected, unusual, possibly impossible events are often a sign of Emmanuel, God with us. So when we find ourselves in the middle of what feels like a red hot mess, we would do well to see it as a holy mess, and to look for God in the midst of it.

That's what Joseph did. He saw God in the midst of a potential disaster and when he did, everything changed. Not only did he take Mary as his wife, he named the baby Jesus and in naming him, he claimed him as his own. We pay attention to the fact that the baby was named Jesus, because it fulfills the angel's foretelling. But those words in the last verse – "he named

him”- are purposeful and important, because in naming Jesus, Joseph claimed him as his own son, and that is how Jesus was grafted into the lineage of David, and the ancient prophecies were fulfilled. Who says Joseph’s part isn’t important?

Joseph’s story is our story. Mostly we are faithful people who are going along, doing our best, living our lives trying to do what is right. And every once in a while something unusual, unexpected or possibly even impossible is asked of us. And just like Joseph, we get to choose. Will we see Emmanuel, God with us, or will we turn away? WE need to remember that Mary and Joseph were real people with real lives that were turned upside down in ways most of us will never encounter. And just as God used them and their messy lives so that God could come among us, we need to remember that God will use us and our messy lives too.

God’s coming is no grander today than it was that night in Bethlehem. And it is no less grand either. It wasn’t only the blessed virgin Mary, the one who is so extraordinary, so beautiful and perfect and willing, she wasn’t the only one who said “yes.” The very ordinary and kind Joseph also said “yes” and that is precisely what made him extraordinary. It’s what makes us extraordinary too. Joseph and Mary were part of a Christmas that on the face of it, was near disaster. And that’s the beauty in it all. God uses us – absolutely ordinary people, to make the world extraordinary, every time we say “yes.”