

“Advent 4: Choices” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
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Test: Matthew 1:18-25 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 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.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

ONE HONEST DESCRIPTION of the birth of Jesus is that it is about the greatest unplanned pregnancy in history. The mother is played by a young Nazareth girl, likely in her middle teens. That is still the age of marriage for girls in third world countries today. She is "engaged" – promised in a marriage arranged by the families, to be consummated at such time as the couple sets up a household together.

Church lore holds that Mary is the daughter of Anne and Joachim, who, after years of childlessness, were visited by an angel who told them that they would conceive a child. Some accounts say her parents gave her to service of the Second Temple when she was only three years old. Certainly this would explain her sweetness, her innocence, her unhesitating deep faith and trust in God. It might even explain why, when courted by the Angel Gabriel, certainly bewildered and probably terrified, she accepts the unacceptable.

Still, young Mary's pregnancy creates a problem. The husband is older. It was and remains common in developing countries for a man to take a younger bride to be his wife. Perhaps he has been widowed or it has taken him time to establish himself in his trade. He is presented as a righteous man, one who upholds God's law. Like many others in the countryside, his family traced their heritage back to the twelve sons of the first Israel, Jacob, the grandfather of all Israel. Mary has said "Yes" to the burden of an inexplicable pregnancy, "Yes" to bearing a child who in turn would bear God into the world. Now Joseph must decide.

Joseph clearly knows the child is not his. Feeling hurt, betrayed, angry, his reputation is at stake, his authority and dignity. But the greater atrocity is the religious sin, the evidence of adultery. Joseph is within his rights to demand that Mary be put through an ordeal, or even that she be stoned to death. Yet, in compassion, even before his dream, Joseph responds out of Grace rather than Law. Instead of making a public spectacle he chooses to divorce her quietly. This was not at all what he planned!

And then the Angel visits. Here was the very angel Mary spoke about, coming now to Joseph, in a dream. God asks Joseph not to be afraid; Joseph is to complete the marriage by taking Mary into his home and -- most important -- by taking on her child as his own son. Joseph's lineage in Royal House of David is to be Jesus' lineage as well.

So Joseph also says "Yes." Indeed this is the first of four times recorded by Matthew that Joseph acts unquestioningly on God's instructions brought by an angel in his dreams. The decision costs Joseph as much as it cost Mary: shame, dishonor, name-calling, pity. Anyone who knew Mary's tale would call him a cuckold.

Even his own family could not abide by what he had done. Think about it. We know that Joseph had to take his wife and travel to his home town, his birth town, to be registered. Why do you think they have no place to stay? When Joseph returns to his family's hometown for the census, he is not received. I imagine his great Aunt Naomi tsk-tsking: "I'll have none of that hussy coming into this house. Cousin Joseph is weak. He should have put her out. They are both to be shunned; his shame shall not be ours!" In a culture where hospitality often meant life or death, a welcome would never be denied a relative except in dire circumstances. Unplanned pregnancy. Unplanned consequences. Or not.

From hindsight, from our historical distance, there is nothing arbitrary or unplanned about any of this. This is God's work, God's initiative, God's story. And by taking time to consider the parents, perhaps our lesson is to consider our own calls, consider our own willingness to trust God even when we cannot see the point.

Deeply grounded in their Hebrew faith, Mary and Joseph accept this unplanned pregnancy, remembering that God's promises had kept the descendants of Abraham safe and faithful during their bondage in Egypt, in Babylon, and now under Rome. God's promises had always been found true and faithful, though the timing might be harder to see.

Rabbi Abraham Herschel, once wrote, "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to surpass his deeds, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does." Listen again: more than he understands in order to understand more than he does." What might you be called to do that is more than you understand, in order to understand more than you do?

To us mortals, with human descriptions and experiences, this is indeed the greatest unplanned pregnancy in history. But to Mary and to Joseph, and to believers over more than 2000 years, it is the beginning of the greatest, most audacious plan ever conceived. It is God's plan to come and be with us, to live as us, as well as in us. "God with us" is an authentic reality, and very deliberate indeed, the deliberate culmination of God's activity in this world.

Who among us has not faced disappointments and disillusionment in life? Who among us has not found ourselves committed to a path we would rather not take, knowing in our hearts that it is where God is calling us?

The story of Jesus' birth, like the story of his death, is not all sweet or gentle. It is full of real people, real dangers, real loves and passions. It is full of anger and anguish; pain, hardship and heartbreak.

Perhaps Immanuel is most readily found in those precise places where life is full of uncertainty and right choices take faith and courage. If "God with us" is found today, perhaps we will find him in a soup kitchen, like Martin de Porres, or a homeless shelter like the winter interfaith effort. In the thrift store, or a church rummage sale. At the local grocery store, the struggling corner store which sits down the street from the long vacant but threatening promise of a huge corporate organic market. At the nursing home, in the faces of those aged ones who automatically sing Christmas carols with us, or mouth the Lords Prayer or 23rd psalm. In children's games, whether in a co-op or racing around the labyrinth after church or on the streets, between the legs of their begging parents. In the hearts of those who share love and forgiveness with one another because they have experienced forgiveness themselves.

The beauty of the Christmas story is its assurance. That even amid life's difficulties, God's plan is being enacted, and God's promise can be trusted.

May it be so for you and for me.