

“Doing the Hard Things”

Matthew 1:18-24

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Last week we heard the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark. Over the next three weeks we will look at the advent of Christ through the lenses of the other three gospel writers.

Today we consider the gospel of Matthew, written in about 80 AD, sometime after Mark¹. Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, like Mark's, is full of references from the Hebrew Bible. Matthew especially emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Matthew was probably a Jewish Christian, writing to the church in Antioch. This church was undergoing lots of change. Though it had originally had Jewish roots, it was becoming become increasingly Gentile. Christians were confused about what traditions and laws they were supposed to keep and which they need no longer worry about. Into this mix, Matthew writes of the advent of Jesus.

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, **(Liturgist) "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife. . .*

¹ Scholars disagree about the exact dating of Matthew, but it was likely between 70 and 100 AD. The preponderance of modern scholarship argues for the later dating.

The most familiar gospel passages are sometimes the hardest. We have heard them so often we don't even listen anymore. We just nod our heads, tune out, and say, "We know this!" I am sure you've had the experience of how much different it is when you slow down and pay close attention. Sometimes I feel this is my main task for the week: getting us all to slow down and pay really close attention to scripture. Matthew begins simply. "This is what happened". Matthew says, "I am going to tell you what I know about the birth of Jesus Christ".

What he presents is a teenage love story². Mary and Joseph were betrothed, which in today's terms means they were legally married but they weren't yet living together. They probably hadn't even been alone together. Once you were betrothed, you couldn't get out of it, except by divorce or death. But Mary is pregnant.

This is a story that is as old as the hills. These days we are not completely unhinged by the news a teenage pregnancy, that is, until it happens to one of us or one of ours. But in Mary's time. . .???

Imagine the talk. The women, at the neighborhood well, leaning in for the news, the inside story of what's happened. Tongues are wagging. It's a small village. The biggest kind of news has to do with betrothals and weddings, pregnancies and babies. Gossip like this would have spread like wildfire.

You almost wonder about Matthew's storyline here. The Messiah conceived out of wedlock? Not exactly holy.

Mary's pregnancy is hugely inconvenient, not just for Mary, but also for Joseph. He knew he wasn't the father, but he doesn't know yet this was the Holy Spirit's doing. What if he had bailed on Mary? What if he had called it quits? By all rights, he could have done so. The Law of Moses gave him every right to divorce her publicly, to reclaim both his

² The Bible tells us practically nothing about Joseph. Traditions say he was a lot older than Mary, but this is unlikely because that was not the usual type of betrothal arrangement at the time. Joseph was probably about 18 and Mary was probably about 14 years old.

bride price and her dowry, and to settle the shame on her. The Old Hebrew Law³ even made it lawful for the community to stone Mary to death for her behavior.

What if Joseph had elected to exercise his rights? We can surmise Mary probably wouldn't have been killed (such stonings were pretty rare by then), but she might have wished she were dead. An unwed teenage mother, rejected by her betrothed. Jesus would have been even more ostracized than he was. No one would have accepted him. And Mary would have been shamed beyond shame.

Joseph is confronted with a hard choice. He has to decide what he is going to do. (Remember, he still doesn't know God is mixed up in all of this.) Joseph ends up making a very grown up choice, a God-inspired choice. What he's going to do is to divorce Mary quietly, to protect her. He chooses NOT to exercise his full legal rights. He chooses NOT to be vindictive. His allegiance is on the side of God and compassion, not on the side of the Law.

The angel of the Lord comes just in the nick of time, by way of a dream in the night. God's timing is good for Mary. Saved by the messenger of the Lord. Saved from public humiliation. Saved from Joseph thinking she's crazy. The angel of the Lord explains the pregnancy is from God. Mary is a virgin. Just as the prophets foretold.

Joseph believes the dream, and acts accordingly. He acts out of obedience to God, even though there's nothing in the holy books about what to do in a situation like this. He takes Mary as his wife. He gives the boy his name, and in so doing, Jesus officially becomes part of the line of David. Just as the prophets foretold.

This is more than just a teenage love story. Joseph's dilemma in this story touches on big questions---questions of faith and obedience, questions about putting our future in God's hands. Joseph answers with wisdom that could have only come from God. Joseph answers by doing the hard thing.

³ In the Pentateuch---Deuteronomy 22:23-27 to be specific

We will never know what went on in Joseph's mind, but you and I know there was a lot more to the story than Matthew was able to tell us. Joseph had to have been angry, scared, and confused. Joseph probably wanted to run, but he didn't. He did the hard thing; he did the obedient thing; he stayed.

This week I was talking with someone in the congregation who is of my mother's generation. She shared with me her sense that people her age *long for the days* when things were simpler. For the days when people seemed to care about values. For the days when God and obedience really meant something. I was trying to reassure her these days are not gone, they are alive and well, even though often they seem hidden.

I see such things alive and well in young people---in idealistic young people who want very much to give to their communities. I see youth acting with compassion for people who are persecuted or discriminated against. Many young people don't worry so much about rules and protocol. Instead, they choose compassion over legalism, just as Joseph did.

I am inspired by the story of Brett and Alex Harris. They wrote a book last year called *Do the Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*. Nearly two years ago they started a grassroots organization to support their political candidate, and they have gone far beyond that now. They are just 17 years old.

They are out there telling their peers to do hard things! To grow up and not shrink from responsibility! Their belief in Christ drives them. Doing hard things is what Jesus did. Doing hard things is what Jesus told us to do.

Brett and Alex are not the only young people who inspire me. My children do as well, as do your children and grandchildren. You have shared your stories of your children's faith, of their commitments, of their obedient work. You have shared their struggles, too, and how they work to overcome the hard things in their lives, how they have had to step forward in faith for an uncertain and sometimes frightening future.

As we ponder the birth of Christ so long ago, as we consider how Jesus continues to come into our lives today, we are aware of so many stories that encompass hard things. The Advent of Christ reminds us that hard things are in service of a much larger picture. Hard things may indeed exist for a grand purpose. Matthew's story today reminds us how two very young people were asked to do hard things to make a home for the Savior. Joseph sacrificed a great deal. Mary's heart was broken more than once.

Today, when we prepare for the One whose news created such a stir so long ago, we are once again invited to participate in this old, old story. We are once again invited to meet the One who forever breaks our human tendency to take the easy way out.

Advent reminds us this One has indeed come. This One for whom there is no insurmountable problem, no irrevocable defeat, no unforgiveable shame. Nothing too hard, nothing too lowly, nothing too daunting. Advent once again calls us to obey the One who offers us *here and now* what we have only longed for in the future. Advent once again insists we are part of a grand, eternal narrative that moves ever forward to God's promised ending.

I close with reflections Brett and Alex shared in an interview:

Our life narrative is we are being faithful servants to Jesus Christ. And when that's the narrative suddenly it makes sense to do hard things because doing hard things is how you grow. . . when you're part of a narrative that's not just all of history, but all of eternity, then suddenly doing hard things is the only logical conclusion.⁴

Sounds like they've been taking lessons from another teenager, one from an old, old story, who did some very hard things a very long time ago.

⁴ NPR interview May 23, 2008 with Michael Martin, "Tell Me More: NPR News".