

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
December 22, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson**

Isaiah 7:3–14

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

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 fulfill 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.

**Quiet Dismissal**

As a youth, I enjoyed reading the entire *Bible*. But, starting about age twelve, I felt my adolescent brain humming with **questions**. Some of these are familiar to you. For example, There were two explanations of Creation in *Genesis*, although I didn’t name it as such until my Old Testament review course at Presbyterian College my freshman year. And, there was a lot of language about **the laws** in *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* that either conflicted with each other or seemed just plain strange. But, few things get the attention of a teenager more quickly than the stories of the **conception of the Christ child** in *Matthew* and *Luke* (1:26-56). This topic always seemed weird, especially after your sex education, however that happened for us. After all, at this time in the Gospel story the fundamentals behind creating **new life** was known to farmers and herders of livestock, but not in any scientific way.

As a result of these conflicting edges to the story, this idea of the Holy Spirit conceiving a child in Mary was whispered in Sunday school and giggled over in the hallway among us students. Then, at Advent and Christmas we all came together and sang boldly to the high heavens about it in song and Word in worship. So, unlike the efforts of Joseph to keep things quiet there was **nothing quiet** about the news of Mary’s conception for most of us. In fact, for Joseph and Mary it was a **revelation**. But, look at the reaction of Joseph as portrayed in *Matthew*.

Isn't that the reaction that we would prefer? To just take in what God has explained to us and go about **business as usual**. But, that is not the complete story of Joseph and his role in this portion of *Matthew*. In opposing Jewish law, he was bold and brilliantly effective. He took his betrothed and cared for her and loved her and cherished her, along with the new child given them to rear and care for and to cherish. Truly, this was a divine gift from God. It gets even more complicated, because we know little of the everyday life of **Joseph and Mary**. The glimpses that we have center on their being faithful Jewish people, with two trips to the temple: The first for the circumcision of the child Jesus and the other being a trip to high and holy days for worship in his teen years. We know about the **flight into Egypt** here in *Matthew*. And, we know that they returned to Nazareth from Egypt. And, from its brief description we only know that these were skilled workers. Likely, they **lived humbly and quietly** in their town (*Matthew* 2:13-23). Then without mention of Joseph, without fanfare, and with minimal involvement from Mary (*John* 2:1-12), **Jesus** began his ministry (*Matthew* 3, *Mark* 1, *Luke* 4, *John* 1).

Prior to our encounter with the **ministry of Jesus**, we receive this story about the early time of Mary's marriage to Joseph. And, these verses provide some interesting information about Jesus. He is conceived in a most unusual way: It is more of a **divine activity of God** instead of a human activity of love and intimacy. There are other things of interest in the birth narratives. In *Luke*, there is a voice for Mary, often called the **Magnificat**, named for the first word she proclaims in the Latin translation of the *Bible*. But, unlike the telling in the *Gospel of Luke*, the vantage or perspective in *Matthew* as we just heard is that of the husband, **Joseph**, and not Mary. Scholars believe that the writer of *Matthew* wanted to address primarily a **Jewish audience**. So, the text is designed to engage a male-dominated society with a story about Joseph's involvement in this situation, or as we really should name it, this **miracle**.

Of course, if we limit ourselves to Joseph, or Mary, then we are omitting the most important portion of this concept of **divine origin** for Jesus: And, that is **God**. The early founders and leaders of the church had little difficulty with this, because of their **reverence for God**. Our reaction is much more muted, because we have a wealth of experience that is founded in, and filtered through, scientific research and **knowledge**; and, this is what informs us, confirming our understanding of the process of conception and forming new life in those terms of science. Opposed to that is **God**. And, like it or not God is **not measurable** and is undetectable in any direct physical sense.

So, the central aspect in these verses is God. If we are able to accept that, then **God's Spirit** is responsible for the Immaculate Conception. And, rightfully this activity of God should be held in **reverence and awe**. And, with this being an act of **Almighty God**, there is little to defend here: Because, God is **all-powerful** and **all-knowing**. And, since there was no physical science class and no organized 8<sup>th</sup> grade sex education for the Jewish people and Gentiles who took in this story 2000 years ago, the believers in the early church really did accept this **on faith alone!**

Today, many want to equate this aspect of **faith** to fantasy or even superstition. And, if all that we had in play and at stake here were physical properties and missing steps, then those persons have a pretty good argument. But, for those of us who **do believe** in God and who understand God as **sovereign** and ruler of all there is **no disconnect** here at all. This is because we understand and accept God as author of all that we know and see: God existed before those things past and present, even knowing and living in the future which lies ahead of us. Through faith, our spiritual nature engages in this aspect of **belief and understanding** through the key element in the worship of God: And, that is what we call **faith**.

You and I can take this stand with confidence: Because, through our faith we obtain the clearness of thought, the openness of our hearts, the general and often total transformation that comes with God being continually present in our lives. This aspect is not something based on pure science. And yet, we know that it is a **powerful force**: One that goes far beyond alpha brain waves, measuring elements with mass spectrometers, and the remarkable images of space from the Hubble telescope. Most of us can accept that science runs a parallel course beside humankind, helping put together solutions to explain mysteries, all the while creating **more questions** and leading to more research and exploration.

Yes, our ability to approach all of this in wonder is hardly scientific. In fact, it is this nearly indescribable aspect of faith that is encapsulated in song in the *Bible*. The passage in *Luke*, the Magnificat, is the Song of Mary, which itself follows the pattern of the Song of Hannah, the Song of Merriam, and the Song of Moses in the Hebrew scriptures.

Indeed, we have a difficult demand made on us to describe the **indescribable**. That is never easy. And, the writer of *Matthew* makes a rather straightforward approach to a basic element in these complex issues. But, the amazing thing here is that **love and trust in God** won out over the factual and practical. Joseph, husband of Mary, was not taking in this situation using scientific explanations, as we do today. Instead, the subject at hand was the **Law of Moses**, which would require a **divorce**, shaming of Mary and her family, and risking a trial and execution of Mary as an **adulterer**.

And yet, even though the writer fails to state it outright we can see that God's work is being done here. God's will is made known through an awkward, but beautiful, act of grace and love in a situation that asks Mary, Joseph, and us to look past the obvious conflict and anxiety in this situation in order to move into the longer and more important aspect of **God's divine nature** and glorious power. This places us alongside the timeless **mystery** of conceiving new life in every form and the miracle of events which make up new life and birth itself.

Whatever went through Joseph's mind in all that is described here, we receive no details. Joseph considered a **quiet dismissal** of Mary to avoid shame on her and her family and endangering Mary herself and the new baby, whom we now know is the Son of God. Instead, Joseph heeded the message from God and quietly dismissed his own reservations about Mary and this unexpected event that has overtaken them both. In obeying God, Joseph demonstrated a wealth of patience, unquestioning **loyalty to God**, and a **transformation** of spirit that allowed him to continue as a proud, expectant father and faithful lifelong companion to his wife, Mary.

Through an act of faith and guided by God, Joseph **obeyed God**. And, this is key to the Gospel message. Because, **faith in God** is the core element throughout the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, the first verses of *Matthew* prepared us for this **divine reality**, because the genealogy of Jesus is intentionally laid out for us. Like you and me, it is gnarly and twisted, containing its share of bad actors and persons of questionable integrity. And yet, just like our lives and our paltry faith **God uses it** all for good, for instruction, for the work of the kingdom, for witness, for service, and for ministry.

And, in this final portion of the Advent season just as **God worked through Joseph and Mary** we are molded and shaped and **transformed by God** through Jesus Christ. Through the power of God, we are remade and reborn: transformed into persons of action, **agents of change** who are needed and vital for God's work in a confusing and conflicted world which challenges and surrounds you and me.

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