

WELCOME 20th December 2020 – 4th Sunday in Advent '20 B

Matthew 1:18-25

Welcome! It's great to be together again. I pray you experience God's grace in abundance in worship today...maybe like never ^b/₄. Please check our website for important information & updates. No Zoom Bible Study this week...**BUT**...

As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources right there in your hands. *Special welcome to those who are with us on-line. We want to equip you so God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & then out into the city to share what God has done for you.* Remember we still do those things we need to maintain a level of safety: Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. No morning tea just yet. Offering. Communion. Thanks set-up/clean-up folks!

As we move into this week... It doesn't feel like... Christmas...since Pop died/Mum moved into care/kids aren't going to be here...we're really married since she's been on deployment since the honeymoon...it's our house since we're still remodeling/boxes everywhere...it's my job since I'm still learning the ropes/cleaning up after my predecessor...I've graduated since I'm not sure what I'll do next...I'm retired since I have the grandkids 3x/week...

We all live with a sort of internal image of how life should/ought to be. We all have some sense of what an ideal Christmas, family gathering, job, church experience, family, life...**IS**. And when the reality doesn't line up with that image...that ideal... Well...it just doesn't *FEEL* right.

Joseph knows *THAT* feeling...His fiancée is pregnant & the child's not his...and... that's **NOT** at all his ideal... **NOT** at all his picture of how life *OUGHT TO* be.

What do you do when God steps in & changes the direction of your life? What do you do when God lays before you a challenge so huge you know you're not up to it on your own & you have to either abandon all hope or release yourself into the greater plans & purposes of the Father?

Joseph discovered Christmas is more than a feeling...It's more than some ideal comforting safe stable circumstance into which we can just settle down & relax. Christmas is God's call to each of us to exchange control of our lives for confidence in the Father's will to save. Christmas is God's invitation to trust his hands on our lives even when that doesn't match what we had planned/wanted/hoped for. Christmas is God's pledge that when "God is with us," he is always "with us" to save – to bless – to make whole/new & to fill us with courage, faith, & obedience so we impact people all around us in the name of this child...so we live the love of that child into the lives of the people we meet.

We'll explore & experience together that Christmas is more.

Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Heavenly Father the best gift of all is your presence & in the bleakness of a stable, your Love was born for us. Pure love - Undiluted Love – Indescribable Love poured out for all. Such grace undeserved requires a response in life here & now.

Forgive our ingratitude. Pardon our apathy. Draw us to you & ignite the fire of your Spirit in us. Breathe to life the life of your Son in us. Grow into fruitfulness your Kingdom in & among us. Continue your saving work in us today; we pray through Jesus Christ...Amen.

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. When was the last time God surprised you?
Worked in your life in an unexpected way? How? Did you like it?
2. We've heard Mark, Luke, & Matthew.
Do you have a favourite introduction to the Christmas gospel? Why?

BIBLES

4th Advent '20 B – CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN...A FEELING

Disinfect. Distance. Masks & Gloves. More times than we can count...ad nauseum over the last 9 months...Why? Stop the spread. Flatten the curve. Until we get control of this virus.

I reckon most of us would like our lives to be a bit more sanitized, squeaky clean, bug free & under control. We want our Christmas trees straight & tall, our lights to twinkle just so, & the wrapped presents picture perfect under the tree. We hope the family can all make it & get along & the food's just right w/ more than enough for all. The very idea of Christmas ignites our memories & our hopes w/ "happily ever after."

Yet...the first Christmas was no storybook rendition. There is no clean & tidy way to see the birth of Jesus from Joseph's eyes. Joseph enters the narrative immersed in confusion, surrounded by uncertainty & driven by dismay. Mary is "pregnant" (& before he knows the whole story) he looks to put the engagement behind him as quickly & quietly as possible w/ all due privacy & consideration for everyone. He plans none of the ugly public acrimony accusations or disgrace that normally went along w/ dissolving a betrothal/engagement contract. He's "*righteous*" which means he's attuned to the Law & its impact on his life & its influence in his decision-making. The Law was never meant to be used as a weapon against another & he doesn't intend to start that w/ Mary...but if "happily ever after" isn't possible w/ her, then at least he can reduce the stares whispers questions of scandal faithfulness & betrayal.

But as he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, & you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, & they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

3 things...because this isn't just about Joseph...this is God's word for you & me... Joseph, **son of David**...I bet Joseph hadn't thought of himself like that b/4...Oh he knew he was in that line...but the **SIGNIFICANCE** of it had been lost for centuries There had been a divided kingdom rebellion disaster defeat exile return & more ruin than even Joseph could recount since a "son of David" had been recognized for anything. But there it is: Joseph, **son of David**...Joseph discovers he is neck deep in the promises of God...son of David...a covenant established by God to raise up a Saviour from the family of David who would rule over God's people forever, who would deliver them from their enemies, create for them a home refuge place of lasting security, would lead them according to God's heart for his lost creation in faithfulness & holiness.

Joseph is told that he stands at the very center of God's plan from forever to bring back to his heart all those he created & had his eye on in love from before the first star shined in the sky. JSOD...is a clear sign that what is happening in Joseph's life w/ Mary is no accident...no happenstance...no afterthought...no mistake or deviation from the ideal...this is God's eternal promise to save...to rebuild, restore, reestablish his promise w/in their midst....to never give up but always to love.

Christmas is God's call to each of us to exchange control of our lives for confidence in the Father's will to save. Christmas is God's invitation to trust his hands on our lives even when that doesn't match what we had planned/wanted/hoped for. Joseph is called to remember that God is in control of all human plans & especially has his hands on Joseph's life even when that life doesn't match what Joseph had drawn up in his own mind for himself & Mary. Even in the middle of plans gone pear-shaped from Joseph's perspective: God is still God & calls Joseph to live in courage, faith, & obedience...just like Mary is & just like the child will. But it gets better...

*"do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was **conceived by the Holy Spirit**...do not be afraid...366 times God plants that assurance in our lives (every day of the year +1 for all the stuff we're afraid of that is never gonna happen)*

But then: **conceived by the Holy Spirit**...Joseph this is no ordinary baby – no regular pregnancy. This is ME in the flesh...My power made plain. My presence made vulnerable like you...for you. Joseph...instead of fearing questions of scandal faithfulness & betrayal...know that the real scandal is not a scandal of immorality but the scandal of the incarnation...the frontal assault on human wisdom & schemes by the Almighty in our skin/bones...for us & for our salvation. Sure, Mary's pregnancy raises questions of faithfulness. But it is not the usual accusation of betrayal & infidelity. Rather, this pregnancy affirms undeniably God's faithfulness & fidelity **TO US** God is in this moment keeping all his promises, reaffirming every covenant, demonstrating the fullness of his love...for us & for our salvation. Keep going...

*you are to name him **Jesus**, for he will save his people from their sins...She will give birth to a son, & they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'* Christmas is God's pledge that when "God is w/ us," he is always "w/ us" to save – to bless – to make whole/new...not to judge condemn destroy punish. You see...you can't go away & miss the very clear word from God: God will always be "God w/ us." God is not some distant relative we see only at Christmas funerals family reunions. God – who made all that is – passionately loves each & every human soul on this planet & pledges himself to be our intimate companion in his Son Jesus - especially those times when nothing is right - absolutely everything hurts ...when even the bottom is above where we are

Christmas is God's pledge that when "God is w/ us," he is always "w/ us" to save even when it costs him his One & only Son. God is personal. He's alive. He thinks, he feels, he speaks, he loves, he knows. God knows every hair on your head & every longing of your heart. He knows every day of your life. God knows it all. AND...you know what? He pays attention. He's a Father who is attentive in detail to all of his sons & daughters...All. The. Time. (hammer & hacksaw)

Our world glamorizes the glamorous, celebrates the celebrated, & heralds the "haves & heroes." But Joseph sees that in the womb of Mary is the God who comes for the least/lost/lowly/lonely/left-behind...those who have no human pretension of power or prestige...The child would ultimately be stripped of every shred of dignity & humanity & flayed bloody & beaten & crucified to declare once & for all that God is w/ those who have been stripped of everything! Stripped of hope! Stripped of love! Stripped of passion! Stripped of piety! Stripped of joy! Stripped of peace! Stripped of assurance! So that in his life raised from death we can have life in fullest abundance love w/o end, peace beyond comprehension, & unstealable joy. He is always working to reclaim us from all that keeps us from living less than the abundant life he offers – living below our status as children of God living smaller/grimier/less than lives...

And then God invites us into that passionate involvement with the world & the people around us...whatever the cost. You see...when "God is w/ us" he wants you & me to have a place in his plans. God's plan was always there when he was w/ us when he freed us from sin/death we would live lives that revealed his glory & grace & goodness in everything we do & everything we are. Joseph is called to live out a love he can't fully understand because it is yet unseen in Mary's womb but has the power to transform all creation back into the garden from which it fell. Joseph discovers he is now an agent of God's justice & righteousness which the Father intends to pour out over the whole creation. He is called to live out a love that trusts God's promise & points to God's faithfulness as the source of his faith love hope joy So...Are...We...

Christmas is God's pledge that when "God is w/ us," he is always "w/ us" to fill us w/ courage, faith, & obedience so we impact people all around us in the name of this child...so we live the love of that child into the lives of the people we meet. God's plan has always been that his people would be a blessing to the whole world...that we would reflect his power in us toward the people & situations in our lives...that we would offer hope in difficult times, peace in troubled times, comfort in sad times, assurance in uncertain times, patience in trying times, wisdom & truth in confused times & joy at all times because the God who has claimed us from sin & death by Jesus' death/rez promises to also transform us by his power & love in all our times.

We all live with a sort of internal image of how life should/ought to be. We all have some sense of what is ideal...but in our broken world we are often reminded that reality doesn't line up with that image...that ideal...

But Christmas is more than some ideal comforting safe stable circumstance into which we can just settle down & relax. Christmas is God's call to each of us to exchange control of our lives for confidence in the Father's will to save. Christmas is God's invitation to trust his hands on our lives even when that doesn't match what we had planned/wanted/hoped for. Christmas is God's pledge that when "God is with us," he is always "with us" to save – to bless – to make whole/new & to fill us with courage, faith, & obedience so we impact people all around us in the name of this child...so we live the love of that child into the lives of the people we meet.

Let's pray w/ that in mind...this is an ancient prayer...seemed right for today:

**"Look upon us, O Lord, and let all the darkness of our souls
vanish before the beams of your brightness.**

Fill us with holy love, and open to us the treasures of your wisdom.

We seek your face. Turn to us and show us your glory.

**Then shall our longing be satisfied, and our peace shall be perfect;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."**