

## Baby Steps

Matthew 1:18-25

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

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West Union, IA

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### Gospel Reading

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a bold statement about Jesus:

"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

From the very beginning, chapter 1 verse 1, Matthew tells us that he will be telling the story of Jesus, who is the Messiah. Then for the next 16 verses, the author lists the ancestors of Jesus showing him to be a direct descendant of Abraham and David. However, in the last verse, verse 16, we are told something that should make us pause:

"Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born."

It does not say that Joseph was the father of Jesus, but that Joseph was the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born. So, if the line of David goes through Joseph, but Joseph is not the father of Jesus, how is Jesus a "son of David?"

Our reading for today, Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 through 25, in part, explains this apparent discrepancy. Listen to the beginning of Matthew's story about the birth of Jesus:

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

### Sermon

The answer we need. The answer to the question, "If Joseph is not the father of Mary's son, how does Matthew claim that Mary's son is a child of David?" The answer comes at the very end of our reading. When Mary bore her son, and Joseph "named him Jesus." In those days, giving a child a name was the same as claiming that child to be your own. Legally we would say that, by naming Mary's child, Joseph adopted him as his own. When Joseph named Mary's son Jesus, he became a descendant of Joseph and all the others named in the genealogy all the way back to David, and farther back to Abraham. How this came to be, is explained in the rest of our reading from Matthew.

We don't learn much about Joseph in scripture. Except for the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, Joseph is hardly mentioned. Except for a few references to Jesus being the Son of Joseph the carpenter, we hear nothing more about Joseph. But it is clear, especially, at the seasons of Advent and Christmas, Joseph is an important character in life of Jesus.

To help us understand more about Joseph, I would like you to think back to a time in your life when you thought you had everything planned out. Maybe you were starting a new job or graduating from High School or college; sometime when you were about to begin the next phase of your life. You had a pretty good idea how things were going to unfold for the next few years, maybe your whole life. But then...something changed, something happened to change the path of your life. Something big enough that you thought everything in your life would change. I think most of us, after the initial shock wore off, would change our plans, and plot a new course.

For Joseph, that day was when he learned that Mary, to whom he was betrothed, was pregnant. Mary had obviously violated their betrothal, a contract to unite in marriage, by having relations with another man. Then we are told that Joseph is a righteous man. Righteous usually meant doing what was right under the law. The Law in this case, when a woman had violated a marriage contract, had been unfaithful, meant a public trial before the village elders, where a conviction would mean at worst death, or at best marking Mary as unfit to marry any man. But, Joseph was more than righteous under the law, he was a just man and decided to quietly release Mary from their contract and go on with his life, a life that would look very different from the one he had planned, the life he had hoped for with Mary.

Then, something else happens to change Joseph's plans again. An angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. The angel gives Joseph important information that we learned from the narrator earlier, Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God. Mary is innocent of any wrongdoing, and Joseph should proceed with the marriage. When Mary has a son, Joseph is to name him Jesus, because the angel says that he will save his people from their sins. Jesus, is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning "God saves." Joseph's plans and his future are changed again.

Now, think again about that time in your life when things changed. Then think of where you are today and all the life changes and events that brought you here. In the past I have shared some of my journey that, over two decades, brought me here as your pastor. I trace it back to a low point, when I was laid off from a good job, left with a family and no immediate way to provide for them. What I can only call a sign from God showed me through a Youth Sunday Worship service how God, not me, was in control of the situation. This led me to preach my first sermon, telling about this experience. That first sermon caused members of that congregation to encourage me to go to lay pastor training. Which eventually led me to go to seminary, start a new career in ministry at a church in Tulsa, which gave me the experience and confidence I needed to answer a call to your congregation here in West Union, IA.

My point is, if I had known in the beginning that God's plan for my life was moving from Tulsa to West Union, I may not have started the journey. Many times in our lives we make choices, or are guided through decisions, that alter our path and in the end we arrive at a destination that we could have never imagined. Sometimes, if we had known in the beginning where we would be in the end, we might have made other decisions, might not have started that journey.

What does this have to do with Joseph, Advent, and Christmas? Next Sunday, in our gospel reading, we will hear of the threat to the life of Mary's child. Joseph will again encounter the angel of God, who will warn him to take Mary and the child to safety in a foreign land, and eventually to return to Israel, but to a different town. But now, before the birth of Jesus, Joseph doesn't know any of that. If he did, would he have taken the risk, and made the choice to obey the angel? Would Joseph have chosen another path?

We know, from this side of Easter, the full story of the life of Mary's child, Jesus. We know all about the miracles that he performed, the difficult things he taught, the persecution he faced, and the wonder of his resurrection. We know that Jesus was the Son of God incarnate in human form. But Joseph didn't know all of that. He only knew that his betrothed, Mary, was having a

son, a special child conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that he, Joseph, should name him Jesus. And, when Joseph awoke from the dream, he did everything that the angel had told him.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, as we come to these last few days before Christmas, I invite you to ponder the events that are coming. Not from the end of the story, but from the beginning of the story, when Joseph knew only that Mary would have a child, a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit of God. A son who will save his people. And, of course, come back here on Christmas Eve to hear the rest of the story of that amazing birth. A story with a multitude of angel, shepherds, and wise men from the east. But now, bask in the joyful expectation, of a simple carpenter, his young bride, and the promises of an angel from the Lord: a son will be born, and he will save his people.

Let us pray:

God of wonders, as we make our way through these final days of preparation, fill us with the anticipation of Joseph and Mary. Having heard from the angel to expect a special birth they showed great faith in accepting the path laid before them. Give us the kind of faith that follows your call. In these final days until the birth of that child, open our eyes and hearts to the wonders that will unfold. Bring us back to celebrate that birth with all who know the name of that child, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

AMEN.