

Another beautiful December ?! day in Maine!

Sadly, we began Sunday morning lighting the Memorial Candle for Don Siegler, Norman's uncle; and for Laura Mills. Laura's Memorial Service will be this Saturday, December 12 at 2:00PM. Jeff Belcher who served the church while Laura attended will officiate.

We were very happy to have Penny Mardoian with us and she lit the 2nd Advent candle of Peace.

The children continued to decorate the Chrismon Tree with ornaments they made in Sunday School. I read Maya Angelou's poem, "Peace" to them from a beautifully illustrated book. The children will light the candle of joy next week. And their Christmas program will take place Dec. 20.

Tomorrow, Dec. 8 at 4:00 Advent Study

December 22 at 5:00 PM we will have a Longest Night service

December 24 Christmas Eve Service..

December 27 after the service, join us to pack up the children's shoeboxes for Samaritan's Purse and share lunch!

Instead of following the lectionary for this season, we continued to explore the people who witnessed the Incarnation. This week it was Joseph.

Matthew 1:18-25

## **MESSAGE**

*God Simplified*

Beth Hood

Some of you may have seen or heard about the headline in the New York Daily News the day after the tragedy in San Bernardino. It read, "God is not going to fix this". And it went on to say that we people who pray are a part of the problem. Well, if you think of prayers as pennies in a wishing well, drop them in and then wait for God to grant your wish, perhaps that is true. But if like, Joseph, when you pray, you open your heart and your life to God, then we can indeed be a part of the solution.

When we meet Joseph in Matthew's Gospel, he is totally confused, wrestling in the dark about what to believe and what to do about Mary's inexplicable pregnancy. This event simply did not fit in to any of the categories by which he had previously defined reality. Truth be told, most of us have sometimes had trouble making sense of the incomprehensible mystery of it all. That's why I love Joseph. That may be one of the reasons Joseph is included in the Christmas story. If there's room for Joseph beside the manger, there may be room for all of us.

Joseph teaches us that honest doubt is not the contradiction of faith, but an essential element in a growing faith. Joseph reminds us that we don't need to have all our questions answered before we find our place in the gospel story. Being a follower of Christ does not mean that we have all the answers to all of our questions. It means trusting that as we learn more about ourselves and about him, our questions will find their own answers.

Matthew may begin with Joseph scratching his head in confusion over the arrival of this child, but that's not where the story ends. Matthew also tells the story of Joseph's faith. Not faith that removes every doubt or question, but faith that sets our lives in a new direction and expresses itself in active obedience to what

we understand as the promise of God. It means trusting the story of this intrusive God who comes down to us to become one of us.

The key to Joseph's story is in verse 24: "When Joseph woke up, he did just as the angel from God commanded." Still wondering what all this could mean, he obeyed. He took Mary as his wife. In taking his place as the father of Mary's child, Joseph stood in the long line of those for whom faith was not only something they did with their brains, but also something they did with their feet. It was not only about the beliefs they held, but also about the way they lived. It was faith that was strengthened on the anvil of active obedience.

In taking Mary as his wife, Joseph took Mary's child as his own which meant that the rest of Joseph's life would be intertwined with the life of Jesus. The rest of Joseph's life was defined by the life of Mary's son.

A young man once asked his professor at seminary, "How can I make a commitment to Christ when I don't know all that it will mean?" The wise professor replied, "None of us knows all that it's going to mean, but we know enough to make the commitment to follow Jesus and we spend the rest of our lives finding out what it means." I think that's what happened for Joseph. He knew enough to claim this child as his own. He stepped out in obedience to what he knew and spent the rest of his life discovering all that it would mean. That's what it means to live by faith. Faith does not mean that we never have any questions or doubts, but it does mean that we have claimed the strange story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be the central story by which we choose to live our lives.

Joseph's active obedience resulted in a radical reorientation of his life. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. That means he was a Synagogue-attending, law-abiding man. God's law handed down from Moses said that a woman in Mary's condition should be stoned. With Mary's pregnancy, Joseph faced a situation that ran directly against the grain of everything he had been taught to believe or obey. His love for Mary went against the rules by which he had lived his life, forcing him to begin living by a new set of assumptions.

There are basic beliefs by which we all live. Sometimes they are the result of our life experience, family or culture. Sometimes they are rooted in the way we have been taught to read Scripture. They are the rules that govern our behavior. But somewhere along the way, we run into experiences of relationships that force us to question some of those beliefs. Sometimes obeying the way revealed in Jesus will mean that these rules are contradicted by our loyalty to Christ, just the way Joseph's loyalty to the law was superseded by his love for Mary.

The angel told Joseph that his supporting role in the drama of salvation was to take Mary as his wife and to name the child Jesus because he will save people from their sins. And that's what Joseph did. Joseph changed his mind, his life and moved in a totally new direction.

For Joseph, God coming down as Jesus was not a comfortable addition to what he already believed. The birth of Jesus called for a radical reorientation in his beliefs that resulted in a radical change in his behavior. It was not an addition to what had been but a new definition of what could be. It was not the reaffirmation of his old beliefs but a total shift in what he believed to be true. The coming of Jesus changed Joseph's plans so that he could participate in God's plan. The Bible calls that obedience.

Biblical obedience means taking action in the present based on what we believe God is doing now and will accomplish in the future. Obedience means that we live our lives in ways that are consistent with the

way we believe this world will be when God's kingdom really comes and God's will is fully done on earth as it is in heaven. Obedience means that we become supporting actors in God's drama of salvation.

The poet and priest of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, George Herbert, wrote:

"Hast thou not heard, what my Lord Jesus did?  
Then let me tell thee a strange story.  
The God of power, as he did ride  
In his majestic robes of glory,  
Reserved to light; and so one day  
He did descend, undressing all the way."

It's a strange story we tell. It's the strange, shocking, incomprehensible story of the Almighty God who lays aside his majestic robes of glory and descends to be Immanuel, God with us, undressing all the way. It's the strange story of the way ordinary, questioning, doubting folks like Joseph can claim this Christ child as their own. It's the strange story of the way human obedience becomes a part of God's work of salvation in this world. And the strangest thing is that when we experience it, we discover that it's true.