

Advent 3

December 11, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Isaiah 40:1-11 Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

2 Peter 3:8-15a Strive to be found by (the Lord) at peace, without spot or blemish

Mark 1:1-8 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness.

Please take out your bulletin, and look at the graphic on the front. It is the familiar scene at the birth of Jesus, but there is something else that we can gather from this scene, as it is drawn by the artist Rossetti. Joseph has his hand on Mary's arm. Mary's face is filled with peace, and love for her new son. The shepherds are kneeling at the manger, happy to share in the moment. The family is happy, the shepherds are happy, the big angel and all the little angels are happy; even the cow and the sheep are happy. Isn't that nice... We need to know the adult side of a Christian Christmas.

Our commitment this Advent is to get Christmas right this year. To get it right, we need to get real. Last week we talked about distinguishing what is Christmas folklore, and what really happened in human history. Today we will explore what Joseph and Mary had to go through, and succeed in, which THEN led to the love and peace and trust that we see in this wonderful image of the Nativity. And the reason for doing that is; what made Christmas right for Joseph and Mary is what also makes Christmas right for you and me. Let's consider three battles that they had to go through before they reached the blessing of Christmas.

First, Joseph and Mary fought a battle for righteousness; or saying this another way, they were determined to live with personal integrity. To explain what I mean, let's listen to a part of the Christmas story that comes from Matthew 1; ¹⁸ *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

²⁰ *But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."*

The battle Joseph and Mary fought over righteousness is in verse 18, 'before they came together'. In our day, when someone is engaged, they might get married, or might not. That was not the case in biblical times. Being engaged was the first phase of marriage; it was announced to everyone in town. And it meant that without any doubt, the couple would marry. It would be a huge scandal for an engagement to be broken. So Mary and Joseph were completely committed to each other. They had settled that they would spend the rest of their lives with each other. Despite the depth of this commitment, they took seriously what their faith required, and decided not to come together; no sexual relations until they were married. They decided to fight the battle to keep their sexual purity. The Christmas story tells us that this kind of righteousness DOES

matter to God. Notice that Scripture points out this commitment of personal integrity that they made. It does not seem to be coincidental that God chose to entrust THEM with the birth and the raising up of the Savior of the world.

1 Peter 3:12, *“¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”* This doesn't mean that God doesn't love people who have lost their way. It says that when God looks for someone to work with to implement work for His Kingdom, God tends to choose a righteous person – someone working hard to walk in God's path.

The message for us is that our personal righteousness matters; sexual-, verbal-, financial-, ethical-, or work-place – righteousness all matter to God; and they affect every relationship we have with other people.

Our faith as Christians requires of us that we consider our own righteousness; our own integrity of faith. Mary and Joseph are your example how to get it right.

The second battle we can see from the Christmas story is the battle Joseph fought to get from rage to graciousness. In our Nativity scene, Joseph looks relaxed and joyful. But let us not forget what he has gone through on his way to this Christmas Card scene. Joseph was a carpenter in a small town. Everybody knew everybody. The engagement had been publically announced, and the whole village was celebrating the delight of the happy couple; whom they all knew. Joseph would have worked hard to handle the details of the engagement well. He would not want to disappoint the people of his little home town. So when Mary shared the news that she was going to have a baby, and he knew they had made the necessary decisions to ensure that would not and could not happen, don't you think his first reaction would involve rage? He had to be creating a list in his mind of who the father could be.

But the Bible says that, Joseph did not want to expose her to public disgrace, and so he planned to divorce her quietly”. In the midst of his devastation, his rage, his surprise, his grief, he tried to figure out a way not to humiliate or discredit Mary. He decided to take the high road. It had to be quite an internal battle to find a state of graciousness.

There are times that I act like a jerk. Maybe someone here has experienced that, too? And it takes hard work, soul searching, humility, and clarity to make a decision to renounce being a jerk. When somebody hurts us, the first thought is to get even; to discredit that person as a way to get even. But even if we do that – get even – it DOESN'T fix things, it DOESN'T make everything feel better. Bummer!

Getting into this state of graciousness also requires forgiving other people for taking their turn at being a jerk; I'm talking about our parents, or brother or sister, or best friend, or spouse, or people we work with. It takes being strong enough to be the one to 'break the pattern', instead of saying 'when they change, I'll change'.

By the way, note one more detail to the passage I read about Joseph. It was AFTER Joseph decided to quietly end the engagement (that is, to NOT publically humiliate her) that the angel appeared to him. Imagine the major relief Joseph must have felt in that moment, that he had NOT publically humiliated Mary.

The third battle for Joseph and Mary was to find a state of trust. Joseph battled to trust Mary that she was being honest about her pregnancy; he trusted the angel about going ahead with the marriage; he trusted the Spirit working within him, telling him that this was the right thing to do; and he trusted all this even though it didn't make any sense. Joseph also showed trust by going ahead with naming the baby Jesus – a name that means 'The one who saves people from their sins'. This baby was going to be born into this small, intimate, conservative Jewish town. And this new baby was going to be named 'The one who saves people from their sins'!! THAT alone required Joseph to have trust that God would work it out.

All of us fight the same battles for trust, and those battles are waged all the time.

- We trust that Christmas is real, that God came here in the person of Jesus.
- We trust that Jesus was born miraculously, to two Jewish peasants.
- We trust that Jesus preached, taught, and healed; was died on a cross between two thieves; and 3 days later was resurrected; and 40 days later ascended to heaven.

God asks you and me to trust Him, even though some of us face this Christmas with medical challenges; financial struggles; job setbacks; tension in the family; or other difficult situations. God asks us to trust that he cares, and is grace-filled, and in Romans 8:28 it is promised that God will somehow orchestrate our circumstances into a plan that winds up being good for us.

It is pretty clear that Joseph and Mary had to fight hard to win the battles for righteousness, graciousness, and trust. And it is safe to say that when the battle was over, the payoff was worth it, a thousand fold. God chose them to be the earthly parents of the Son of God.

If we're going to get this Christmas right, we have to be in the fight for those same three things; righteousness, graciousness, and trust. God will join us in the fight, and as a faith family, we are here to support each other every step of the way. With the Holy Spirit's help, we can win. And when we win, we will not only get Christmas right, but we will get our marriages right; and our families right; and our work-place challenges right; and our friendships right; and our church life right.

This is the adult side of a Christian Christmas. It is a story of God calling us to be better than we are.

This isn't easy. But Joseph and Mary showed us how it is done.

Let's commit between now and Christmas to raise the bar on our work for righteousness, and graciousness, and trust. It is part of getting Christmas right. Amen.