

Advent 4, Year A,

22nd December, 2019

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

Isaiah 7:10-16 NRSV / Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV

Prelude

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

When we think of the movers and shakers of the world,

what type of people come to mind?

For many of us, it would be those with power and influence,

people with the resources to enact significant change,

or those who can reach large numbers of people with their message.

Certainly the captains of industry have great financial resources at their disposal,

and sadly more and more that translates into great political capital as well.

They can greatly influence public policy and opinion with their resources.

Likewise, those who have a large audience in the traditional media,

and increasingly those who have large followings on social media,

are often seen as having great influence,

even resulting in the term “influencer”

becoming a mainstream term

for those on YouTube or Instagram

with millions of followers and views.

We often think of those with names like

Rockefeller and Roosevelt, Churchill and Carnegie, and Oprah and Huda.

Those with power and prestige can have an influence,
particularly in the short-term.

But when you look at the long arc of history,
it isn't always the rich and powerful who make the biggest impact.

Our gospel story this morning is a prime example of that.

The main characters in our narrative are not people of prestige and power.

They are not wealthy landowners, connected with the religious or Roman elite.

They are not skilled orators in the public arena.

In fact, it doesn't get much plainer and insignificant as Joseph and Mary.

While they weren't social outcasts,

they were certainly far from the halls of power in their day.

Joseph, a simple craftsman from a backwater town in Galilee

and Mary, whose background we have no information of,

other than some of her family lived in Bethany,

an even smaller backwater village

at the edge of the Judean wilderness.

And while Joseph can claim descentance from King David,

it's obvious he's not from a branch

that has benefitted from that connection.

He's just an ordinary guy on the street in Nazareth, nothing special,

at least not on the surface.

Yet he's about to be a main character

in the most impactful of events of human history.

However, he has no influence to speak of in the society of his day.

No money to buy politicians or influence the media.

He doesn't have thousands of followers on Instagram,

and if he had social media,

his likes would probably all be his family and close friends.

Yet this is who God chose to pair with Mary,

the one chosen as a human adoptive father for Jesus:

an average Joe, from the margins of the culture.

Joseph was more than the average Joe however.

Our story this morning is not without tension;

like any good narrative, we have a conflict to contend with.

Mary is pregnant and her marriage to Joseph is not yet complete.

While in today's world that is hardly unusual,

that was a huge deal in Joseph's time.

You can be sure there would have been "talk" around town.

Some things never change from then to now.

After all, Mary would have begun to show,

and it would be obvious that either Joseph wasn't the father,

or it would be assumed that he couldn't wait for the marriage

to have some fun.

Regardless, the gossip mill in Nazareth would be running full tilt.

To seek justice from the Temple and the courts

would have enabled him to save face in society,
but would have resulted in Mary being publicly shamed,
perhaps even stoned to death.

Yet, Joseph made a different choice, and in that choice

we see the first hints of why this apparently unremarkable man from Galilee
is chosen to play such a significant role in human history.

The prevailing interpretation of the law was clear in this matter.

He could not take her as his wife if she carried the child of another.

The law was meant to ensure his honor,

that his heirs would be legitimate to continue his legacy.

Male lineage was central to a patriarchal culture such as his.

The only choice he had, according to current legal thought,

was how to dismiss Mary.

He could take the very public approach through the courts or Temple,

which would not bode well for Mary.

The other option, which would show compassion and concern for another,

agape love,

would be to quietly dismiss her back to her father's household,

often with some sort of compensation

from the father for his trouble.

His concern for the law shows his commitment to his faith, yet,

like the child he was soon to take as his own,

he shows how the law should be interpreted

in light of the nature of a compassionate God.

His story is one of compassion and faith.

He makes plans to settle things in his own quiet way,

And a quiet way it is.

In the entire New Testament, Joseph doesn't have one word of spoken dialogue.

But does he need to speak?

His actions demonstrate so much more.

Then an angel visits him in a dream and tells him to do something radical;

to take Mary as his wife and that her child was conceived through the Spirit.

In his slumber God provided him the answer

that eluded him in his waking discernment.

He makes the choice to follow the directions of his dream

and accept Mary's child as his own, and give him a name,

the name of Jesus, or "God saves," when translated from Hebrew.

His choice to accept Jesus and give him a name is crucial to the story.

It is only by becoming part of Joseph's family

that he can be tied to the line of David.

It is only this connection, and that of Mary's virgin conception,

that tie him to the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7.

But despite the connection to prophecy, Joseph still had the choice to make.

He could have gotten up the next morning,

decided that he shouldn't eat before bed

because of the crazy dream he had,

and gone on with the plan to divorce Mary.

But he didn't.

He made the choice to accept God's divine message from the angel.

He decided to make the righteous decision,

founded on a faith that has love and compassion as its lens.

Throughout this story, Joseph is living in the tension

that Jesus leads us into in the Sermon on the Mount

four chapters later in Matthew.

“You have heard it said...but I say...”

The law is the law,

but it's application needs to be interpreted

through the compassionate nature of the Divine.

In this liminal time of Advent, this time of already and not yet,

we know the impact this humble family that is forming

in the sticks of a somewhat insignificant province of the Roman empire.

We can identify with them. After all, they are regular people like us.

People without the influence that wealth and privilege bring.

People living simple lives in humble circumstances.

Yet the impact they make on the world is still being felt over two thousand years later.

In a couple of days we will gather together

to celebrate the arrival of the light of the world in a stable in Bethlehem.

We will end our celebration by lighting our own candles from the Christ candle,

symbolizing us carrying that light into our world, as disciples.

As we continue in our time of Advent meditation and reflection for the next few days,

let us ask ourselves, are we truly being that love light in the world?

As individuals, what are we doing every day

to show that agape love to all whom we meet?

As a community of faith, what are we doing to live lives of love together

and how are we showing that love outside these walls?

God didn't choose King Herod to father Jesus,

God chose a lowly carpenter.

God didn't choose an elegant queen to mother Jesus,

but a simple peasant girl.

From Mahatma Gandhi to Mother Teresa,

the Divine choice has often been for the humble to do the work of the Divine

over the mighty.

Great things have been done by those on the margins

who were willing to answer that call,

the greatest of which was simply agreeing

to the call of parenthood in our story today.

We all have received that call to live similar lives of selfless love.

The question today is will we answer that call,

in everything that we say and do.

As we conclude our service on this last Sunday of Advent,

while we enjoy our special jazz performance,

let us give some thought of at least one,

if not more ways we as individuals can live love this week,
and how we as Christ's body in this time and place
can visibly live love in the world around us.

If you'd like to formalize your commitment to living love,
feel free to jot some concrete steps you and we can take going forward
and drop them in the offering plates in the back
as a symbol of your commitment to answering God's call to love this morning.

May we all find ways to embody the love that defines our Creator.

May it be so, Amen.