

What Child is This?

First Congregational Church Branford

12/23/18; Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Suzanne Personette

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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the Word of God for the people of the Good News.

Let us pray.

Well, gentlemen, what would you do?

Can you imagine this conversation... the girl you’re about to marry tells you an angel says she’s pregnant from the Holy Spirit... I mean! There’s certainly no joy in hearing *that* news.

Joseph, some 15-30 years older than Mary, must’ve thought that Mary had taken up with that neighbor boy down the street. You know the one! While teenage, out of wedlock pregnancy doesn’t much surprise us anymore, you can only imagine what it would’ve been like *a long time ago, in a Galilee far, far away*. The degree of shame in 5 BC Palestine would’ve been immense.

Joseph, heartbroken and devastated, intended to call the marriage off. And Mary, imagine **her**, going to her betrothed - which in Jewish law meant they were actually married - to tell her “husband” whom she’d not yet had relations, that she was with child. She must’ve known that Joseph and her family would put her out on the street. At 12-14 years old, Mary must’ve been very frightened.

Before we get to the next part of the story, here's what we have on Joseph - he was a descendant of King David. This fulfilled the scripture prophecy that the Messiah would come from "the house of David." Of all the men who could've been picked, a simple village carpenter was the one chosen to help raise the Christ child to adulthood. Joseph was a righteous God-loving, and "just" man - honest and fair - and good. That's why he would've quietly told the community that he had just changed his mind about getting married. *I'm just too old, too set in my ways.* I think that's pretty great. Some would've taken their revenge!; but, Joseph did not wish Mary to be stoned to death by neighbors - the usual community punishment for adultery. No, he didn't want that for Mary.

Then, *lo and behold*, Joseph has a dream in which an angel appears and tells him **be not afraid** to take Mary as your wife, that the child in her is from the Holy Spirit; that she will bear a son, and that Joseph is to name him Jesus, which means *savior*. As a God-loving man, Joseph decided not to doubt this message! Thank God for angels, right?! Oh yeah, I found this in the meetinghouse this morning. [place behind ear] By the way, there are 299 references to angels in the bible. Which means they're pretty important!

Now, might it still have been hard for Joseph, especially in those days, that Jesus wasn't his biological child? Yes! But, Joseph stepped up and raised Jesus as his own, as adoptive fathers do. It even appeared for a time that Jesus was going to take over the family carpentry business! But, Mary and Joseph understood that God had plans for their son, *his son*.

Of course, many people don't buy the virgin birth. I hear that. I get that. What child *is* this? It's been a long time since I struggled with my doubts around the event. Somewhere along the way, I just decided to embrace the "mystery." Humans don't know everything, not *everything* can be explained. In the end, regardless of *how* Jesus came into the world, God chose Mary and Joseph to be the parents of the savior child. Just like he wanted.

While I choose to believe there was something mysterious about this child, what matters to me about this child is that he was here, that he loved God, that he kept saying "yes", *just like his mother and father said yes*. It matters that he was the one who told us we are *loved*, and how our lives can change if we love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and if we love one another like we love ourselves. No one had told us before! Not until *this child*.

It matters that this child said to love your enemies.... do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. No one had said that. But, Jesus did.

It matters that while Jesus came for all, he was born for the lost and forsaken, the forgotten, the despised, the losers, the imperfects, the homeless, the weak, the powerless, the migrants.

It matters that this child was born in a simple stable, where there was only love to light the way.

It matters that we can be forgiven any wrong and be welcomed back into the arms of God - and begin again. No one had ever said such a thing. Jesus said you can be forgiven and begin again and again.

It matters that Jesus said we each have a light that can destroy any darkness. And, when we shine, he's alive in us.

It matters that on Thursday, Parker Fox was fulfilling his reception role - he gave his permission to share this - he was talking about what he'd done for his granddaughter that morning, and I said how terrific it was, to which he replied, *I'm there when she needs me*. I smiled and said, that's a good song title - *I'm there when she needs me*. Parker then goes... *that's our church, too. We're here when you need us.....* It gets even better. Later that morning he and I caught up again - he wanted to share that he realized where he'd gotten that phrase. He shared that he'd lost his dad when he was 10. Parker was an only child, and his mother worked in a factory - working impossible hours. They were members of South Meriden Methodist Church. One day the minister, who was a Yale Divinity student because the church couldn't afford a "real" minister, put his arm around young Parker and said, *you've lost your father, but I want you to know the church is here when you need us*. And, Parker goes, with so much pride in you, that's our church. We're here when you need us...

Heck, we're here even when you don't!

The point is, Jesus is alive here.

And, that matters.

He's a child who lives here.

In each of you. In each of us.

It matters that this past Tuesday, Barbara Colley handed me a New York Times article entitled, *Internet Church isn't really Church*. Can I get an Amen?! You may have already seen or heard the studies that say going to church is good for your health. They haven't found any such thing among those who watch church from home. I'm not talking about you who are housebound. There's a whole slew of people who choose not to come in and be part of a community, who watch live streaming church from the convenience and comforts of their home, and there are even actual online churches you can attend. Well, to get that bump in your health you HAVE to be next to people! You have to join in, be with, share silence and song and words and *touch!*

The journalist makes a point that watching and being church from home suggests that God is primarily present to us one on one, rather than as life among the believers. But, the bible says, where two or more are gathered is where God's gonna be.... that an individual, isolated experience of church is the poorer one.

She writes, We can be members of a body best when we observe and wipe away tears, rejoice and share smiles, and have face to face conversations.

What about communion? And, children?, and all of us singing off key, and eating too many donuts in coffee hour?!

What child is this?

This child is an incarnate one!

In the flesh, the physical.

Thanks be to God for that.

For coming down to earth.

Thanks be to God for you.

Happy Fourth Week of Love, Beloved. Amen.
(lay feather on the baby Jesus in the manger)