

Christmas 1, 2008

1. Matthew 1: 18 – 24 / The Holy Family

In the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Who was there that first Christmas morning, and what brought them there? What was on their mind and what was on their heart, that long ago day by the manger, well obviously Mary was there for one. And so was Joseph, her new husband.

Just a reminder, how marriage worked in ancient times. First of all, marriages were arranged by the families involved, meaning that the prospective bride and groom probably were *acquainted* with each other, but may never have seriously thought of each other as a life partner. Marriage was definitely not about romance; it was about economics, it was about stability. It was about two people with similar backgrounds and similar expectations in life, laying a good ground work for the next generation. Now in our world today, where everything is about romance and feelings and personal fulfillment, what Mary and Joseph were handed by their elders seems totally and completely unacceptable. On the other hand, our world today endures a 50% divorce rate, and even among marriages that succeed are more than a few that are quietly, desperately unhappy. So while we can't go back in time to the Biblical era and probably wouldn't want to, still when it comes to dating and "courtship" maybe we can take off the rose colored glasses, and understand the realities of marriage a bit better, as well as the joys—and maybe appreciate more deeply what the Bible has in mind.

Ancient marriage, part 2. She was probably 15, he was closer to 30. Why? Well in our world, we are threatened by over population—6 billion souls on this earth and counting. In antiquity, the threat was always just the opposite: Under-population—fall below a certain level, and food production and everything else starts to break down. You had to have children, you had to have workers. Therefore girls were married off as soon as they were able to bear children, and guys? Well fellas, nothing personal, but sometimes it takes us a little longer to grow brains. It takes us a

little longer to settle down and be mature enough to support a family, so men delayed marriage till closer to 30—when they probably had a job, and had settled into life, and were able to support the children they brought into the world. It was all about the children—that’s another thing couples today ought to remember, before they go see the judge.

So. Mary and Joseph, a 15 year old and a 30 year old who’d never been out on a date together until after they were married—and once you’re married, ok, how many dates do you go out on anyway? Don’t answer, anyway, there they were. Feeling scared and cold and lonely and ill at ease in each other’s presence, but committed to doing the right thing. That’s what this passage from Matthew tells us about Joseph, that I think is something we also know about Mary—whatever they felt, they were committed to doing the right thing.

In our marriages, in our families. At school, on the job. The way we spend our time, the way we spend our money. Sunday morning, when it’s easier to stay home than get up and come to church, whatever you may feel. What are you going to do? Whatever you may feel, what are you going to do, the lesson of Mary and Joseph—those who belong to Jesus Christ, feel a lot of things, we’re only human. But we are called to do the right thing, and trust this Jesus Christ to carry us home. And you know what? He will.

2. Luke 2: 1 – 7 / The townsfolk

About the townsfolk, the people of Bethlehem, there's not a great deal to say. The most important event in human history was unfolding right under their noses, and they missed it. Too busy I guess too, distracted. What can you say? They missed Jesus.

These were not bad people, ok. We sometimes disparage the people of Bethlehem for sending Mary and Joseph out to the barn, "there was no room for them in the inn" and nobody gave up their room for a pregnant girl, how dare they. But inns back then were nothing like we expect when we check into a Motel 6, ok, so to be honest sending Mary and Joseph to the barn where they could have some peace and quiet and privacy—well, that may have been the kindest thing they could do under the circumstances.

But of course that's the last we hear of the people of Bethlehem. The angels who woke the shepherds didn't wake them. The star that lead the Wise Men didn't lead them. They missed Christmas. Not bad people, just—busy, I guess.

We're not bad people either. We do kind things, like send money to the poor and give to World Hunger at the holidays. But like the folks in Bethlehem—out of sight, out of mind, we do a good deed. Then forget about it, and turn back on ourselves and our own small, self-contained worlds. So much is happening, right under our noses, do you realize that? God is at work in this world, do you see? Will you let yourself become a part? Or is your little world, more important somehow than God's big plan?

Let's learn from the people of Bethlehem, and with the help of God, let's learn at last to outgrow ourselves. The better to grow, into the fullness of Christ.

3. Luke 2: 8 – 14 / The angels

The Bible says surprising little about angels. What exactly do they look like? Do they think and feel and choose the way humans do? What do they do all day, do they get a day off now and then to go bowling, what is life like for an angel anyhow? We don't know. I suspect if we needed to know, the Bible would say something more. All it really says however, is that angels exist, and that they do the will of God on earth below, and in heaven above.

We do not become angels when we die. I know, I know, I've seen those movies too, cute. Misleading. We do not become angels when we die; but I think the point is we can become a bit more like the angels, while we live.

What is it we seek on this earth, what is it we want. More and better presents under the tree? A good return on our mutual funds, a promising future for our kids? A life free from worry, or trouble, or unhappiness of any kind? Things like that would sure be nice. Oh yeah. But the message of the Bible is simply this, that stuff—will never be enough. That stuff will never be enough, see you have a hole in your heart, that only God can fill. There is a cross sized hole in your heart, and we keep trying to fill that hole with Lord-only-knows-what, it doesn't work. As St. Augustine prayed to Christ a long time ago, “You have made us for yourself. And our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.”

An angel is one, whose heart is at rest. An angel is one, who has been filled with the presence of God, and so needs nothing else. Wants, nothing else. And the promise of Christmas is, here on earth, we can be more like that. That cross-sized hole in your heart can be filled, by Christ, and you can find peace. You can share peace, and sing of peace. Filled with the presence of Christ, here on earth you yourself—can be a bit more like the angels of heaven. So may it be for you all.

4. The shepherds / Luke 2: 15 – 20

I suspect our view of the shepherds of Bethlehem is heavily influenced by the dozens of Christmas pageants we've seen over the years. Put a housecoat on a 3rd grade boy and presto! You've got a shepherd.

What you need to know about shepherds at the time of Christ is this—nobody liked them. Nobody liked them, nobody trusted them, the work of sheep herding was considered beneath the dignity of decent citizens and the only people who would do that kind of work—the ones who couldn't or wouldn't look for anything better. Shepherds then were held in some measure of contempt by polite society—which is why Luke insists on telling us, that they were the first to hear the Good News. Held in contempt by this world, yet treasured by God, these are the people—poor, lonely, cast off—these are the people beloved by God. These are the people the Christ child has come to save. And this is where the action is.

At Christmas we feel a movement of compassion for the poor in our midst, and the less fortunate. We do our part, and it is good, then get back to life as usual. Like we've done them a favor. No. They've done us a favor. The Good News of God unfolds first and foremost among the poor and the downtrodden, people like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, people who had nothing! The Good News unfolds there first and foremost; God does us a favor, by allowing us to join in.

If you want to look for Christ at Christmas, try the food pantry, or the homeless shelter. That's where He was with the shepherds then, and that's where He is now.

5. The rest of the story / Philippians 2: 5 – 11

And now, as Paul Harvey might say, the rest. Of the story.

This Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate. This Jesus Christ did not stay a small child, but grew up in faith and love and obedience to the will of God. He taught the crowds, and gave them food. He healed the sick, and spoke of real life, eternal life. He died on a cross, to forgive our sins, He rose from the dead for our salvation. And He will be back, judge of the living and the dead, His Kingdom to have no end. In Him we live and move and have our being. In Him we hope and trust and believe. In Him and through Him, we and all creation shall be brought into the presence of God forever.

This Jesus Christ whose birth we celebrate. This Jesus did not remain a small child—and neither should we. We gather, child-like, around the manger. Then we go out into the world, His servants. His ambassadors. Washed by the water, filled with the Spirit—forgiven, redeemed, destined for a place in heaven. Committed to our calling on earth.

Commit your hearts to seek the paths which Christ has trod. And quickened by the Spirit's power—rise up o saints of God.