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St. James', Mt. Airy  
12/4/16

Advent 2A  
Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

An angel said, “do not be afraid.”

While not used in exactly the same way, this is the only connecting point between the two different versions of Jesus’ birth narrative found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

It’s easy to forget that our Christmas story is pulled from two different books of scripture, because we so easily make it into one narrative without hesitation, mixing together The Annunciation and Mary’s visit to Elizabeth with Joseph’s dream, the shepherds with the Magi, the Escape into Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents with the Dedication in the Temple.

When we do that, it makes for an incredible story – one worthy of a pageant every year.

But today, on this last Sunday of Advent, as we approach the Mystery of Christmas, we only hear a small part of the story – Matthew’s version of the events that led to the birth of Jesus – a part that often seems a side-note to the larger drama.

It's no wonder that Luke's version, with Mary at its center, is the more well-known part of the story and the one we often focus on. It is by rights the center of the story, as a pregnant woman is to every birth story. But more than that, in Luke we see Mary come to terms with God's promise in ways both small and breathtaking – from her response to the shocking visit from the angel, on through her visit with Elizabeth which elicits the haunting poetry of the *Magnificat*.

Joseph's experience, however, was not at the center of the mystery of the incarnation. God did not visit him first. And when an angel of the Lord did finally visit him, it was merely in a dream, followed by a few compulsory sentences saying that when he woke, he did as he was told and then a baby was born.

And that can lead us into dismissing the significance of Joseph's story, of the *mere* dream and what it meant – what it still means for us today.

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Do you know what your name means? Have you ever looked at those books of baby names that list all the variations, their origins and their meanings? Names are fascinating things – what they mean, how they are chosen, who we are named after.

I have a cousin named Alex but my uncle took one look at him as a baby and declared he looked more like a Ralph, and that's what we always called him. Eight years ago today I chose the name Jasper in part because he was due in the season of Epiphany, and it's the Anglicized version of Gaspar, one of the Magi. I am thankful every day that my parents quickly let go of the idea of naming me MERRY since I was due on December 23<sup>rd</sup>. Every family has stories about names.

And names are at the center of Joseph's dream – at the heart of Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth.

*You are to name him Jesus.*

This is the instruction given to both Mary and Joseph by the angel. Jesus was a common name of the day, being in Hebrew the same as Joshua. But what the angel said to Joseph indicated that it would take on uncommon meaning, “*for he will save his people from their sins.*”

Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospel writers, played on his audience's intimate knowledge of their history and their stories to create a new story. The beginning of the Gospel clearly shows this with the long list of the genealogy beginning with Abraham and ending with Joseph, creating a line to Jesus from the deepest roots of their faith history. And he counted on his listeners to know that it was Joshua who brought the Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses.

Anglican scholar N.T. Wright argues that Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to but could not itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the exile they have suffered in their own hearts and lives.

A common name that would be made uncommon if only for the life this baby would have – a life that would model compassion and justice, ending in a death that showed forth love and eternal life.

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By contrast, the other name that is given in Joseph's dream, Emmanuel, was not common. It was not given to anyone else, perhaps because it would say more about the child than anyone would normally dare.<sup>1</sup>

*Emmanuel, which means God is with us.*

Taken from the passage in Isaiah that we read today, Matthew uses the image of *God with us* to frame his Gospel. It is declared at Jesus' impending birth, and it closes this Gospel as well, the very last line being, "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

This is **why** Joseph's story. This is **why** the dream. This is **why** the names.

To declare from the beginning to all who have ears to hear that there is a new shoot growing forth from the branch of Jesse and that a new story has begun from the pages of the old one.

The two names together express the meaning of that story. God is present with God's people. God is always active, not intervening from a distance, but close at hand and sometimes in the most unexpected ways. And God's actions are aimed at rescuing people from oppression and suffering.<sup>2</sup>

This is our story. The promise of Jesus/*God with us* is our story. This is what we approach when we speak of the Mystery of Christmas. This is the glorious impossible happening – that God was conceived in a woman and became fully human – the miracle of the incarnation.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*.

That is what we need to **re-member** and use to **re-center** ourselves in the next seven days as we live the chaos that is the week before Christmas. That is what we need **every** day.

To remember that it's not just a pageant once a year. It's not just the myriad images on Christmas cards of that scene in the manger. It's isn't a story about something that may or may not have happened as we're told it did about 2000 years ago.

It is the still point in time when the glorious impossible did happen, and God was with us, that God might be so fully with us evermore. It is about the life that the man Jesus would become, illuminating God in new ways. It is about God's promise to be with us always and Jesus giving us ways to embody that together – in sacraments like baptism and Eucharist, in the commandment that we love God with all that we are, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

And it all began with an angel. And a visit. And a dream. And from there came shepherds and Magi – and us too. And so, let us prepare with anticipation once again the celebration of the coming of the baby known as Jesus, *God with us*, wrapped in swaddling clothes, that we may hold him closely to our hearts and accept the gift that is offered.

~ AMEN ~