

“Three Tough Questions” – Mt 1:18-25 – Advent 4 – Dec 22, 2013

There’s an old rule of thumb in the entertainment industry that applies equally well to preaching – never follow an act that has children or animals, or worse yet, both! And so, given that outstanding and heartwarming presentation by the Sunday School this morning, you can see that I have a challenge here. How do I begin to help you unwrap Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus while at the same time keep from sounding like the Grinch busy trashing all of the Christmas gifts in Whoville? So much of what we celebrate at Christmas comes to us from Luke’s gospel, and by comparison Matthew’s account is much simpler, more drab, devoid of much of the familiar images of angels and shepherds and even a manger.

However, it is important that every three years, following the pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary, that we do unwrap Matthew’s version because it has a particular importance to our Christian faith – especially as it concerns how we understand Jesus as the Messiah, Immanuel, God with us.

We are helped in that unwrapping process by recalling the world into which Matthew wrote his version of the profound event of the coming of the Messiah. People had been for years building up an excitement over the anticipated arrival of the Messiah promised in scripture. They eagerly awaited a ‘new’ David, ready to tackle a new Goliath called the Roman occupiers, an Elijah-figure who would cure the sins and errors of their lapsed society with a thunderous prophetic word, calling down the wrath of God like a purifying fire. Many people of faith pined and longed for horsemen of the apocalypse to come and purge the earth – especially to purge it of those ‘other’ people who were committing all the nastiness. There was a passionate desire for a Holy Invasion, a tromp-tromp-tromp of God-sized combat boots crushing out all evil along with the grapes of wrath in an effort to win the hearts and minds of sinners.

But that’s not how God wrote history, is it? While God’s version of the arrival of the Messiah was less than people imagined, it was way more than we could have dreamed, a way of grace and mercy that was so totally different from how we would have written it. Instead of those divine-sized combat boots, God gave us baby booties – the soft, halting gentle padding of a baby’s foot upon this fragile earth. In a quiet, all-too-ordinary event shared by every one of us, God brought salvation to the earth through the birth of a baby. An unremarkable birth in so many ways, and yet so remarkable in its significance, in its meaning, that we in far-off lands and thousands of years later still celebrate that birth. Instead of a calamitous, earth-shaking and thunderous arrival, the Messiah appeared in a most natural way, in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere to an unremarkable couple. That arrival was so natural, so normal that it could have been missed, except for a few subtle little signals of God’s involvement, signals so subtle that both Matthew and Luke go to considerable lengths to explain, to tell us the how and the why of God’s involvement in this earth-changing event.

The beginning point for Matthew, and for us, is that this event was the arrival of the Messiah. However, he feels a need to answer three somewhat difficult questions about this birth, the first being, “How can the Divine and Holy Jesus be the human son of David?” The answer Matthew gives is straightforward enough, in that Joseph was betrothed to Mary at the time of her conceiving, and at the time of the birth the two were married, making him the legal father of Jesus. In our day and age we need to be reminded that Joseph and Mary being betrothed meant something quite different from what we understand as being engaged. Betrothal in their day was a legal commitment that could only be ended with a divorce, which was indeed what Joseph was considering when we hear him thinking about “dismissing her quietly.” However, he didn’t, and so Jesus is legitimately an heir of David through Joseph.

The second question that Matthew addresses is, “how can the human son of David also be the Divine Son of God?” or to put it a different way, “how can this unusual birth be claimed as God’s doing?” Unusual birth? Well, ordinary enough in the actual birth itself, but certainly unusual in the nature of how it came about. Matthew asserts rather matter-of-fact that the conception was “from the Holy Spirit” – which in and of itself would cause most of us at the very least to raise an eyebrow. “Hon, I’m pregnant”, paired with “but we haven’t had sex” would be enough to put just about any relationship, betrothal or not, into some distress. But Joseph was a righteous man, we are told, wanting to do the right thing, and so there was no instant dissolution. And then in the time that followed, God revealed to Joseph through an angel in a dream what it was all about, and that he should hang in there, which of course he did. What happened to Joseph once he had fulfilled his role in providing the linkage and lineage with David is lost to history – we simply don’t know, as he quickly fades from the picture while the story shifts to the baby growing from son of David into Son of God.

Which is, naturally enough, the third question addressed by Matthew, namely, “where does this child fit in the divine scheme of promise and fulfillment?” It is vitally important for Matthew to point out that this birth, this arrival of the Messiah, was truly the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, that the birth of Jesus was no capricious out-of-the-blue happening but was instead very much a fulfillment of God’s promises in scripture, in what we now call the Old Testament. Some twelve times Matthew uses the expression we hear here, “what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets” not just as a proof pattern but as a declaration of God’s faithfulness, as a demonstration that God indeed not only had been listening to His people, but had been talking to His people, and had now acted.

The questions of the parentage of Jesus were certainly important to Matthew, but are they important for us? Most definitely! Matthew obviously felt an overwhelming urge to show how Jesus was at the same time both the Son of Man and the Son of God – the fulfillment of prophecy as coming from the line of David and yet also uniquely connected with God.

Why the need for so much explanation about this birth? Because it was so ordinary in the way that it happened, and yet so earth-shaking unusual in the way it came about, and in what it meant. Emmanuel: “God is with us”, not in some thundering explosive arrival, but with the soft pitter-patter of baby steps. So long awaited, so unexpected, this way of God touching history, becoming one with us, sharing our fragility, reaching out in love, offering Himself in order that we could be saved from our sins, that we could be completely forgiven and reconciled with Him. While the birth of this tiny baby was ordinary and usual, the meaning of the birth is cosmic, earth-changing, heavenly and divine, and so we need not only to hear the explanations, but to pause often to reflect upon and to give thanks for God’s incredible act of self-giving in the birth of Jesus.

I think we can take a lesson from how God’s reality of giving us a Messiah was in some ways less than what people wanted and longed for, and yet was much more than we could have dreamed. Perhaps if we reflect often on the unusual way that God touched and joined with His creatures – unusual in that it was soft, tender, and ordinary – we might discover that God still reaches out and touches us in the same way – softly, tenderly, and in ordinary ways. We often have a tendency when we ask God in prayer to intervene in our lives to look for some huge and dramatic shift in the cosmos that will signal His arrival and intervention. Just maybe we need to remember that God’s intervention to save the world was done with tiny baby steps, and that if we look closely we can see similar hugely important baby steps of God happening in our lives. In

doing so, we just might be able to recognize those tiny, incremental but oh-so-important changes in our lives signaling God responding to our pining.

God's becoming flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus really was more than we can dream ... that blessed event was a fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and as such delivered the promises of God, and sealed the covenants, fulfilling the dream of being free from sin, free to be reconciled with God. Later this week we will once again celebrate Christmas Eve, that most special of nights. Ponder a while, savour the delicious difference between the thunderous way the world anticipated the Messiah and the soft, tender, loving, self-giving way that it happened. Listen for the soft and gentle cooing of the baby that signaled the very presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us in Jesus, the Christ. Savour the love of our Father that enfolds and wraps us like a baby's blanket, keeping us safe. Rejoice in the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit that enables us to experience God's love in ways that are more than we can dream.