

CHOOSE WELCOME
Randall Tremba
December 18, 2016
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 1:18-25

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. Her husband to be, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly, [rather than shame her.]

But an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, "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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah [600 years earlier]: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God with us."

When Joseph awoke, he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and Joseph named him Jesus.

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Mary knew something that Joseph didn't know. Mary knew she was with child and that child was not Joseph's. It was, as Ethel said last Sunday in her sermon, a *dubious* pregnancy. It was, in fact, not only dubious but also *scandalous*.

At that time and in that place no one would embrace an illegitimate child, especially the husband-in-waiting. But Joseph would. Yes, there was that dream and the angel but could such a thing be trusted? Could a single dream overcome doubts and fears?

In that society Mary's baby would be scorned and shunned. But Joseph publicly named Mary's baby. Joseph publicly claimed the child as his own. It was a brave, bold and radical act of welcome.

Joseph, like Mary before him, said YES to the inconceivable. Joseph chose welcome when he could have slammed the door.

With parents like that no wonder Jesus welcomed others that society scorned and called unholy or deplorable. All were welcome at his table. And that too was scandalous.

The gospel story before us was not known at the time. It would be many, many years later, long after the death of Jesus that this story with the angel in the dream would be told.

Many take this story literally as a supernatural act superseding the biological laws of nature—this birth and only this birth as a freak of nature. That reading gets a lot of mileage out of the prophet Isaiah's declaration 600 years earlier: *A virgin shall conceive*

and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God with us. As it turns out the word translated “virgin” in Matthew is “young maiden” in Isaiah. The literal reading gets a lot of mileage out of one dubious word.

But Isaiah’s proclamation was not about the distant future or some supernatural act of divine intervention but rather a simple declaration for that moment in time. It was reassurance that despite the gloom that had befallen his nation—not unlike the gloom that distresses many of us these days—despite gloom and darkness life would go on. Children would be born. Children would be named. God would be present. You could count on that.

Reading the nativity story literally is one way. And I don’t want to talk you out of that. But I would like to offer another way of hearing the declaration that this child to be born of Mary is *from the Holy Spirit*. To get there all we have to ask is: *What child isn’t conceived by the Holy Spirit?*

It’s not so much that Jesus is unique, some freak of nature, as it is that Jesus uniquely reveals who we are and what we are meant to do and be. This story is a revelation of our own identity and destiny as children conceived by the Holy Spirit, conceived in an original blessing not in original sin. It hearkens back to the Genesis story of creation: *humankind, male and female, created in the image and likeness of God.*

That’s one reason we call this scripture and not just literature. It’s a revelation.

The virgin birth is true for every one born. Which is to say: we are more than biological beings, products of genes and genealogies. We bear the likeness of God, the Holy One. We are one with the divine as much as Jesus. We can choose to act one way or another.

When we make Mary and Joseph saints and put them on a pedestal removed from the ordinary world and its messiness, we miss the truth. This story reveals not only a holy family but also what a holy community can be—a church, a society, a nation, a world.

Like Mary and Joseph we must choose. We can say YES or NO. When we choose welcome Emmanuel comes. As Nelson Mandela put it: *may our choices reflect our hopes and not our fears.*

Which means: parents, churches and societies can embrace its LGBTQ children or slam the door. We can embrace black lives or slam the door. We can choose to welcome the outcast, the homeless, the poor and refugee or we can slam the door. And as inconceivable as it may be, you can choose to welcome certain deplorable persons in your own small world, or you can slam the door.

We are Mary and Joseph. We can conceive the inconceivable. We can discover that God is with us on the journey when we make room, when we make room at the Table for everyone born.

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Hymn 769

“For Every One Born (A Place at the Table)”