

“Emmanuel: God Is With Us”

Matthew 1:18-24

December 4, 2011

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It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," her husband replied, "you'll know the day after tomorrow." The next morning, she turned to her husband again and said the same thing, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And her husband said, "You'll know tomorrow." On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, "I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And he smiled back, "You'll know tonight." That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. And when she did, she found-a book! And the book's title was "The Meaning of Dreams." (It always helps to listen carefully to your wife when she repeats something to you! I heard that this is called “active listening” in our communication!

Today’s Scripture reading talks about a different dream. The angel Gabriel, God’s messenger, appeared to Joseph in a dream and said that his fiancé, Mary, would conceive and bear a son. Joseph was told to name his son “Emmanuel” which means ‘God is with us.’ Every year, in this season of Advent, we hear this story of the birth of Jesus. I hope that you don’t feel that your faith is being tested by the virgin Mary’s pregnancy. (If we can say anything about this from a biological perspective, Mary could only supply half the required DNA or Jesus would have been exact clone of his mother). Both Matthew and Luke report that Mary became pregnant in a supernatural way. The focus of the angel Gabriel’s message wasn’t to prove the biological reality of ‘virginal conception’ to Joseph. The main point of the angel Gabriel’s message was that Jesus was conceived not by a human being, but by the ‘direct intervention’ of the Holy Spirit. This has more theological meaning in this story. In other words, God’s core essence came into humanity in Jesus. This has a special meaning for us. We know that God is not visible and not tangible, but God became finally visible in Jesus. The name of Jesus comes from the word, Joshua, which means “He will save them from their sins.” And Emmanuel means “God is with us.” So, Advent is a celebration of the ‘invisible God’ coming down to us as the ‘visible God’ who will save us from our sins and will be with us.

This morning, I would like to talk about “Emmanuel: God is with us” from Joseph’s perspective. Joseph must have felt very confused, angry or even wounded from this situation; he especially must have felt deeply hurt by Mary, his fiancé, until he later realized that it was God’s plan by the angel Gabriel. Let’s revisit the story to see what exactly happened to him. As I mentioned last Sunday, Mary lived in Nazareth, a very small town in the northern part of Israel. We usually assume that Mary and Joseph grew up and lived in Nazareth, but Joseph’s hometown was most likely Bethlehem (a village of five hundred to a thousand people) which is around eighty miles away towards the South. Since Joseph lived in Bethlehem, we guess Mary’s engagement was most likely a long-distance arrangement by their families in both towns. Bethlehem was six miles away from Jerusalem and the name of the city means, “House of Bread.” Archeological studies show that there were many laborers and shepherds. Many farmers grew wheat and barley, and there were millers and bakers who would transport bread to the big city of Jerusalem for their business.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary was told that she would be pregnant by the Holy Spirit in Nazareth (Gospel of Luke), and she was pregnant there. Joseph didn’t know what exactly happened to her (obviously there was no cell phone or internet connection for email service) until he met Mary. After Mary was pregnant, she traveled down here to visit her cousin Elizabeth (it was around 80 miles away which is located in Ein Karem and nearby Bethlehem) and stayed there for a while. Elizabeth’s house was very close from Bethlehem (It was only four miles away). We can guess that Joseph would have met Mary there and heard of Mary’s pregnancy at Elizabeth’s house. Can you imagine Joseph’s broken heart when he heard that she was pregnant with someone else’s baby? Can you imagine his despair, anger and his tragically broken heart? Maybe it was the most horrible and worst day ever in his life. On his way back home, he must have felt for a moment that everything he was building and dreaming had all of sudden collapsed and was crushed and destroyed in front of his face.

Have you ever had the horrible day like Joseph’s experience in your life journey? Or do you remember the worst day in your life? We pretend to be smart, independent, to take care of our business and to be perfect throughout our life’s journey, but it is also true that at the same time, life is not predictable, and we easily get hurt, discouraged and vulnerable in the storms of our life. We need guidance for our life. We see here Joseph’s confusion, hurt and wounded heart. This must have been a hurtful, humiliating betrayal from a loving and trustworthy person. So according to the Bible, Joseph was a decent and righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he planned to dismiss her quietly. His heart must have been broken!

While we are journeying our life, there are times that we are face difficult times. Sometimes, we stumble over obstacles like failure, despair, betrayal or hurt in life. Sometimes, we can't understand why these things happen to use, but life doesn't always follow our predictions. It comes to us unexpectedly, and we have to deal with those challenges alone. Sometimes, we cannot see God's bigger plan for us yet, but God never leaves us alone. Don't stay in despair. God has a plan for you. God will open up a new door when a door is closing. The birth of Jesus is the reminder that God is at work and a reminder that God never stops working. When Joseph was in his pain and hurt in despair, God began new thing for him through Mary. Pastor Adam Hamilton reminds us in his book, *The journey –Walking the Road to Bethlehem*(2011), “When life gets hard and even painful, we would do well to remember Joseph. Just as it all seems to be going wrong, it could be then that God is doing something remarkable that you or I simply cannot see yet. God takes our disappointment, heartache, and pain and uses them in profound way. If Joseph had simply walked away that day, leaving Mary as a single mom to raise the child she was carrying, imagine what blessings he would have missed and how different the Gospel story may have been.” This is the reminder to us to be cautious about becoming discouraged from disappointment. Let's remember that God is coming to us in this season to be hope, to be with us and to love us. That is the message of Advent.

Do you remember the poem about the footprint in the sand (composed by Mary Stevenson)? This is one of my favorite stories which inspires me and reminds me of God's abundant love in my life. The story goes like this: One night, in a dream, a person is walking on a beach with God. They leave two sets of footprints in the sand behind them. Looking back, the tracks seem to represent various stages of this person's life. At some point along the way the two trails dwindle to one, especially at the lowest and most hopeless moments of that person's life. When questioning God, believing that God must have abandoned his follower during those times, God gives the explanation: 'During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you'.

God promised us that “you are good in my care. I will never leave you alone.” As the angel Gabriel spoke to Joseph, God speaks to us saying, “Do not be afraid. Take courage and trust in me!” In this beautiful season of Advent, I pray that we remember this promise in our hearts. The birth of Jesus is God's assurance that God is with us, so do not feel afraid. Be strong and be bold in the storms of life because God will be with you wherever you are in your life journey.