

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 7:10-16  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 1:18-25  
December 18, 2022

#### **FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

### ***“Complete Trust”***

Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

There’s a mystery in my family tree. My father’s mother was Swedish and her family were all devout Baptists. It was a big family, and when I started to investigate, I found out there were even more children than I knew about, because a number died in infancy. But here is the mystery: Jan Johannson (who later changed his name to John Williams—go figure) married Matilda Gustafsdotter on December 16, 1876. **Their son Carl was born three weeks later in January.** Jan was twelve years older than Matilda, and by all accounts a respectable carpenter. Matilda was only 19. Their son Carl proved to be very different from his siblings and moved away from the family as a young adult.

I have wondered if Jan married Matilda to rescue her from the shame and desperation of being an unmarried mother. She could have even been deceived and abandoned, or the victim of an assault. It certainly wasn’t a virgin birth, but it takes a special kind of man to marry a woman who is expecting someone else’s child, and to raise that child as his own. Jan and Matilda had a long and happy marriage. If he married her to rescue her, it worked out well in the end. I know nothing about my Swedish great-grandfather. I have a few photographs and his Swedish prayer book, but I would like to think he was a good and compassionate man, just as Joseph was.

Luke’s gospel tells the story from Mary’s perspective. Matthew’s records things from Joseph’s point of view. Like my ancestor, Joseph would have been older than Mary, and a carpenter. When he discovered that his young bride to be was pregnant it had to be a kick in the gut. They were betrothed, a legally binding relationship much stronger than our “engagement.” Joseph would have probably known Mary all his life.

The Roman authorities stopped the Jewish nation from carrying out the death penalty on their own, which is just as well because by law Mary could have been stoned to death. But the scandal was still deadly. Her entire family would be shamed. 19<sup>th</sup> century Sweden and 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine both made life intolerable for unwed mothers. Joseph was trying to figure out a way he could “divorce” Mary quietly, the only way to end the betrothal. The family could then send her away to visit relatives. She could have the child quietly and a quiet adoption could be arranged. As a devout man he was almost required to divorce Mary according to the law, but he was trying to minimize harm as much as possible. But an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as

your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

That must have been some dream! And we are not told what Joseph said or thought, **only what he did**. He took Mary home to be his wife. In so doing he protected her and took the shame upon himself, because everyone would conclude that they had been up to something before the betrothal time was up. No doubt that did happen on occasion. Joseph acknowledged Jesus as his own. He took the heat and disapproval of society. He protected Mary, and he protected Jesus.

What God asked of Joseph was extremely difficult. And Joseph was also deprived of another right, the right of the father to name the child. He was told to name the baby Jesus, a Greek form of Yehosua, what we in English render as “Joshua.” The name means “YHWH is salvation.” The reason given to him is that Jesus will save his people from their sins.

People don’t generally want to be saved from their sins. They want revenge. They want justification. They want to triumph over their enemies. The Jewish people wanted the Romans driven out, their crippling taxes gone, their oppressive presence removed. But we are told this child will not address any of these long-held grievances. This child was being sent to deliver us from sin.

Matthew then expands the story to put it in a broader context, telling us that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). But if we look at this prophecy in its original 8<sup>th</sup> century context, it has an entirely different meaning. And that is the problem with prophecy. It’s all down to interpretation.

Isaiah first said these words to King Ahaz in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the original Hebrew the word “virgin” isn’t even used, but rather the word meaning a young unmarried woman. It was generally assumed she would be a virgin, so that is how the Greek version of the Old Testament translated it. At the time Jerusalem was under siege and it looked like destruction was imminent. Isaiah prophesied to calm Ahaz’s fears telling him that a boy child named Emmanuel would be born to a young woman and by the time he knew right from wrong the land of the two kings Ahaz dreaded would be laid waste. Emmanuel means “God with us.” But there is nothing in the text to indicate that this would be a miraculous birth.

The fulfillment of prophecy is a major theme of Matthew’s. This child will not be called Emmanuel, but Jesus. It is the people who will recognize that Jesus “God with us.” His name is Jesus. His role is Emmanuel. But is it fair to add another meaning on to a prophecy which already had one? We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a very literal interpretation of events. We are in to historical accuracy and historical context. But ancient peoples didn’t care anything about that! They were by and large mystics. Jews and Christians and pagans all believed that multiple interpretations to prophetic words were valid. There were any number of ways to interpret prophetic scripture—allegorical, numerical, double fulfillment and more. What Matthew was doing was putting forth the idea of double fulfillment. The word from Isaiah had an immediate 8<sup>th</sup> century

interpretation, and a much longer term and deeper spiritual interpretation, fulfilled in Jesus.

We often commend Mary for her trust, but Joseph demonstrated an amazing trust and faith in God. Joseph obeyed God at great personal cost. He accepted that Mary had not cheated on him. He accepted that this child was unique. He accepted the responsibility of protecting and raising God's son. That is somewhat terrifying. And we do not have any record of Joseph's words. We don't know what he thought. But we do know what he did.

Often we assume that following God's will is passive. It's just down to us to accept things. It's God's will that the job fell through. It's God's will that our house caught fire. It's God's will that a loved one died. **But that is fatalism, not faith.** God's will is NOT always the status quo. What IS is not always what God desires. There is a difference between God's permissive will, what God allows, and God's express will, what God desires for us. There is suffering and starvation in our world. God allows it to happen because God allows us free will. But it is not God's express will that this be the case. God's express will is that we do something about it!

Following God's will often involves taking action. Sometimes it will cost us. People may even gossip about us. We can be sure they gossiped about Joseph and Mary. Doing God's will involves protecting the vulnerable. It involves advocating for people. It involves care for the poor, food for the hungry and a welcome to the homeless and the refugee. **This is a biblical principle,** NOT a political position. Doing God's will is a life-long commitment, but it is a gift to the world. And we don't need to know everything or do everything because we are just one part of a whole. All we need is the trust of Joseph to take the first step and keep walking. Amen.

Isaiah 7:10-16

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup> "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

<sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?<sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, <sup>16</sup> for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was

faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

**20** But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

**22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: **23** “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

**24** When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **25** But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.