



“Celebrate Messiah: Believe Confidently”

Fourth Sunday of Advent
8:15 and 11:00 am Sunday, December 18, 2016
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I like taking walks in the woods. There's one spot in particular that I really enjoy, I find it very cathartic to just to kind of get out into the woods in the middle of nowhere and just take a path. This one particular pathway that I've taken, I've taken many times, I've traveled it often. I go to a certain spot and then just kind of turn around and go back out of the woods. One time just a couple of weeks ago, I decided though to keep going. The pathway had taken me to my normal spot where I would do the turnaround, and I chose to keep walking. I went over a little ridge and then down a hill and I came upon this one location that was just beautiful. There was a stream that crossed the path and there was one of those little, no it's not really a water fall, it kind of just goes down a little bit though; but it made this wonderful babbling noise. You know this little babbling creek. There is a tree that had fallen and so it is a perfect place for a picnic and you can just sit there on the fallen tree and it's just a really, really beautiful, beautiful spot. I traveled that pathway so many times, but that was the first time that I went just a little bit farther. Isn't it wonderful when we can go down a pathway and discover new places? And I wonder if that's a metaphor for life. Sometimes we must move beyond what we're used to, to the places that are undiscovered. We must move into the not knowing. If we just go a little further, if we seek out the unknown we can push ourselves perhaps beyond our comfort zone. And isn't all of life a constant encounter with the unknown? Albert Einstein once said, *“The most beautiful thing we can experience is a sense of the mysterious.”* Who knows what tomorrow might bring.

And so, the gospel tells us to believe confidently what God will bring to us. The perspective of the gospels that deal with the infancy narratives of Jesus are usually coming from two places. In Luke's gospel, we get to see the perspective is from Mary's eyes. Mary has the wonderful stories about the manger and the animals and the shepherds; and in Matthew's gospel it is coming from Joseph's eyes. Now the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, took place in this way. When his mother Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Engaged men and women didn't come together until marriage, and so Mary's pregnancy is humiliating for Joseph. The law, the Jewish Law declares Mary a sinner and an outcast. And Joseph rightly can have her stoned. He can have her executed publicly, brutally. It is his right to do that. The gospel writer tells us that Joseph is a righteous man. Instead however, he decides to quietly divorce her, what that means is that Joseph as the unguilty party in this situation is going to take on to himself some of the social stigma. He is going to dishonor himself and his family by quietly divorcing her. He will take on some of the embarrassment of a seemingly unfaithful fiancée. But God does something to Joseph. He sends an angel to reveal to Joseph God's plan of salvation. And this causes Joseph to rethink

what is righteous. He takes Joseph down an unknown path and it leaves for him a fundamental reevaluation from his values and his beliefs. The angel tells him not to be afraid of this undiscovered path, to embrace the mystery of God and his purposes. To believe confidently that ultimately God is in charge and will work for good for both himself and for Mary. Indeed, God will work for good for the world. So instead of quietly divorcing her, instead of bringing upon this dishonor and humiliation, Joseph marries Mary. And then as his right, as the father he is able to name the child that is born of Mary.

In Matthew's gospel, there are two names that are given. One of them comes from a prophecy given almost 500 years before the child is even born, and the other is a rather common name, a derivation of the great Jewish leader Joshua, another who led the people of Israel down an unknown path into an unknown land that God had promised them after slavery in Egypt and a long journey home.

The first name is Emmanuel, Emmanuel, God is with us. The second name Yeshua, Jesus Yahweh God saves. These names are both who Jesus is and what Jesus does. They're names and they are also definitions. They express the meaning of Matthew's gospel that God is active and alive, saving and sharing. God saves a people and those people are those who are willing to listen to this Jesus. Those who are willing to follow him, he will save them from their sins, their brokenness, their disobedience. Notice that the judgment begins with his people God's people. It's a reminder that as God's people we should always take a look in the mirror before judging others.

A side note, hell in Matthew's gospel is not a place for the external enemies of God, but instead hell is used as a threat for people who think they are the people of God. Emmanuel and Jesus, God is with us and saves us. In most religions in the world God is completely other. God is the primary actor and human beings are just witnesses to what God is doing. God is over and beyond us. But Christianity witnesses to something very different. Christianity witnesses to God with us that God's love is so great for us that God wants to come down to us and live with us. Christians have been singing of this great mystery for generations upon generations. The ancient Christian hymn, the Te Deum, says it when you took our flesh to set us free you humbly chosen the virgins womb.

The Genesis of life in Jesus is the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that breathes life into creation. That same Spirit that gave the prophets words, that same Spirit that comes into you and me in baptism, it's the Holy Spirit that makes alive Jesus in the person of Mary and into the person of you and of me.

The birth of Jesus is God's initiative. Every conversion, every desire to change and follow him, every decision to follow Jesus is a virgin birth with God all things are possible. And so, brothers and sisters let Jesus be born in you today, be open to a new path he might lead you to. He will be with you and save you. His Spirit is with us to make Jesus alive in our hearts and so we can celebrate the Messiah who invites us to believe confidently and give us his creative Spirit so the life of Christ might be born in us. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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