

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
18 December 2022

Matthew 1:18-25

A new Pastor in a small town spent the first four days making personal visits to each of the members, inviting them to come to his first services. The following Sunday the church was all but empty. Accordingly, the Pastor placed a notice in the local newspapers, stating that, because the church was dead, it was everyone's duty to give it a decent Christian burial. The funeral would be held the following Sunday afternoon, the notice said. Morbidly curious, a large crowd turned out for the "funeral." In front of the pulpit, they saw a closed coffin, smothered in flowers. After the Pastor delivered the eulogy, he opened the coffin and invited his congregation to come forward and pay their final respects to their dead church. Filled with curiosity as to what would represent the corpse of a "dead church," all the people eagerly lined up to look in the coffin. Each "mourner" peeped into the coffin then quickly turned away with a guilty, sheepish look. In the coffin, tilted at the correct angle, was a large mirror.

When did Jesus of Nazareth become the Son of God, Messiah, Savior? On the surface this is a silly question, but when you analyze the Biblical record you realize that this was an important question for the authors of the New Testament. There are at least four answers to this question. Let me start from the earliest to the last answer. At around the year 56, Paul states in Romans 1:4, "(Jesus) was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." For Paul, it is at the resurrection that Jesus becomes the Messiah or Savior of the world. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Paul doesn't give us any information about Jesus' birth, infancy, or early ministry. To him, the events that transpired at the cross and, most especially, the events that took place at the resurrection are at the center of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Approximately 14 years later, around the year 70, the Evangelist Mark gives us a different answer. For him Jesus becomes the Son of God or Messiah at baptism. At least, it is at baptism that God himself declares Jesus to be his Son. Mark says the following at 1:10-11, "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Perhaps this is the reason why Mark does not give us an infancy narrative. Baptism is the point at which Jesus' identity as Messiah is most fully understood. The entire narrative of Mark flows from this experience of Baptism, where Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and thrust into mission for and in the world.

Luke and Matthew use different source materials but arrive at the same place. They both affirm that Jesus became Savior and Messiah at the time of conception. It is

through divine intervention in the life of a young virgin that the genesis of the Messiah takes place. In fact, this is what the angel tells Mary in Luke 1:32 when the angel says, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” The identity of Jesus as Messiah is revealed by the angel to Mary in Luke and to Joseph in Matthew. In both of these cases the angel says his name is to be Jesus, which means Savior. The vocation of the child is none other than to be Messiah, Savior, God-with-us or Emmanuel as many will call him. The Savior will be none other than God’s own presence among us.

Approximately 10 years after Luke and Matthew, the Evangelist John gives us the last answer to the question, “When did Jesus become the Son of God or Messiah?” In a way this is what John says, “It wasn’t at the resurrection, it wasn’t at the baptism, and it wasn’t at conception. He was in the beginning with God (1:2). In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1).” Through the Messiah all things came into being. This is John’s answer. The Messiah has always been with God because he is God. Then, at the right time, he took on flesh, being born of a virgin, choosing to become one of us to save us from within creation.

In today’s Gospel, therefore, we remember Matthew’s unique answer to the question. He gives us a narrative that is compelling in many ways. This narrative, which in today’s gospel begins at verse 18, truly starts at verse one. Matthew places the genesis or beginning of Jesus all the way back at Abraham’s day. The genealogy of Jesus is very important. Matthew wants all of us to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Jewish Scripture, but he also wants to tell us that God had the inclusion of the Gentiles in his mind from the beginning of creation. God had the inclusion of the margins in mind from the start of creation. This is the reason why Matthew gives us a genealogy that includes women as well as men; Gentiles as well as Jews; and sinners as well as righteous people. That Matthew includes Ruth, Tamar, and Rahab in his genealogy is important because these women had histories of immorality and were known sinners. Yet God used them to accomplish his will for his people. This is significant because if God used these ancestors of Jesus, even though they were sinners, then God can use us as well to accomplish his will on this earth. This brings great hope into our lives.

After the genealogy, Matthew tells us about Joseph. Joseph finds out that Mary is with child and he knows that the child could not be his. He has two choices: He can bring Mary before the courts and accuse her of sexual immorality. This charge would result in severe punishment for Mary and Joseph would be free to marry anyone else. We are told that Joseph felt compassion for Mary and decided to divorce her quietly, perhaps to save her from the public humiliation and legal trouble. Joseph had the right to divorce Mary. In fact, the community and family would have expected him to. A man who out of love or compassion decided to marry or remained married to a woman who had been defiled, was seen as a weak man, the ridicule of the town.

Matthew tells us that Joseph had a dream and through this dream he learned God's will for his life. He was to take Mary as his wife and he was to legally adopt the baby. Joseph will do this and the child will become legally his when he claims him as his own. The angel tells Joseph two things about the baby. One, his name will be Joshua (Hebrew) or Jesus (Aramaic), which means "Savior". The child's very name will be a public statement of his vocation as the Savior of the world. The angel also says that many ("they") will call the baby "Emmanuel", which means God is with us. Through Jesus, God has chosen to dwell among us humans. God is here. Now, the verb in the phrase Emmanuel (emmanu el) is in the present tense, "is". It is not, "God was with us", or "God will be with us", but rather, "God IS with us". In Jesus God is here among us. In fact these are Jesus' last words in Matthew. Before he ascends to heaven, he tells his disciples (MT 28:20), "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus used the present tense, "I AM". Not "I will be", but "I AM".

My friends, Christmas is the time when we remember that God is with us here and now through the person of Jesus Christ. Where Christ is there is love and forgiveness. Where Christ is there is care and attention for those who suffer, those who are hungry, and those who lack justice. Where Christ is churches are full and there is no need for funerals of dead churches. In other words, where Christ is there is freedom and joy. Yet, many people feel more in bondage at Christmas time than at any other time during the year. Many celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace by making their lives more chaotic. And, sadly, many become rather depressed at this time of joy.

This baby that is coming in a few days is already among us, and, in him, the fullness of God dwells. We don't have to go through all the stress and the chaos of the shopping season to welcome him into our lives. For the Christian, every day is Christmas, for Christ comes into our lives daily. He is with us and he will never leave us. It is good to celebrate birthdays, but we cannot pretend that Jesus just comes to us once a year on Christmas day. This is not true. With him in our corporate lives daily there is no need to celebrate the funeral of dead churches. We need more of the real thing! We need Christmas every day, without the anxiety of traffic, malls, and credit card bills.

May he come into your life today and may we be ready to receive him. Amen!