

Matthew 1:18-25
(Isaiah 9:2-7; Romans 1:1-6)
“The Obedience of Faith”

Introduction

When we read carefully the genealogy of Jesus that opens Matthew’s gospel, we are overwhelmed by the obvious theme of brokenness: how God takes broken people, broken promises and broken dreams, and uses them to bring salvation. He delights in confounding human wisdom and using things that this world considers weak and foolish in order to accomplish his highest purposes. When the moment of redemption finally comes, the moment for which God’s people have earnestly prayed and longed, God does not suddenly turn history into a fairy tale, removing pain and suffering, resolving conflict.

We watch in wonder as God invades the lives of two lovely young people, a man and a woman engaged to be married, planning their future, blissfully ignorant of the terrifying way that God is about to change their lives forever, making them part of the salvation for which they have prayed all their lives. They will be broken for our healing, and the possibility of their ever living the lives they had planned, quiet lives of simple pleasures, will be changed forever.

Body

1. Look first at Mary:

Longing for a normal life

Mary’s marriage would have been arranged when she was thirteen or fourteen years old. She dreamed, as most young girls throughout history have dreamed, of marriage and children, of a husband who would love her and provide for her, of taking her place as an esteemed mother of Israel. She longed for her people to know once again the glory that had been theirs under David and Solomon. With her people, she prayed for the Lord to send his Messiah and free them from bondage. With a joyful and expectant heart, she waited for her period of betrothal to end in the marriage feast, and for the beginning of her life as a woman in her own home.

The trouble with God’s favor

Into this happy scene comes the angel, Gabriel, with terrifying news. Mary has found favor with the Lord and has been chosen for an impossible task: she is somehow, miraculously to conceive a child by the Spirit of God, a child who will be the Savior for whom she has prayed all her life. She must bear this message to her family and friends, carry this child to term and raise him

as her own, while married to a man who is not the father of her first-born. Has anyone been given a more terrible burden to bear?

The obedience of faith

Yet she does not hesitate. She asks one simple, chaste question of this terrifying messenger: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). When Gabriel tells her that God will accomplish it through his power, she bows low and responds: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Is it any wonder that for two thousand years Christians have called Mary blessed, and have seen her as the ultimate model of humble submission to the purposes of God, even when his plans are at cross-purposes with ours? Although her life was completely unsettled, and the day would come when she would see her beloved son “wounded for our transgressions and pierced for our iniquities,” the meaning and purpose of her life was now secure: she would bring salvation to the world.

2. Look also at Joseph:

Longing for a normal life

So, too, Joseph was longing for the day to come when he would claim his lovely young bride and take her to his home. He longed for children, strong sons whom he would teach to work with him in his carpenter shop, and beautiful daughters, little Marys, to help their mother run the home. Joseph would probably have been in his early twenties, and longed to take his place among the men of the community who raised up children for the Lord.

The trouble with God's favor

As Joseph dreamed his dreams, the awful news came that his betrothed, lovely young Mary – whom his family had sought for him because of her beauty, her well-connected family, and her unspotted reputation as a pure young woman who loved the Lord with all her heart – this same Mary was pregnant. How devastating to Joseph, how humiliating that the woman he had desired and chosen, to whom he had betrothed himself, was not willing to wait for him, but had sought another, had given herself to another, and now stood exposed before her family.

Yet we see the great heart of this young man who, although so deeply humiliated and wounded, nevertheless was more concerned for Mary than he was for himself, and resolved, rather than seeking public vindication and revenge, sought to break the engagement quietly, so as not to cause her further humiliation and shame.

At this moment, when all seemed broken beyond repair, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and confirmed to him the same message that had been given to Mary: this is from the Lord, and the child she carries is the Savior for whom Israel has longed. “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).

The obedience of faith

And so, like Mary, this young man humbly submits to the terrifying purposes of God, and takes Mary to be his wife, but has no physical relation with her until the birth of Jesus. Too seldom, I think, do Christians remember that Joseph was called to something high and holy, and terribly difficult: to raise a child not his own, to humbly bear the vicious gossip that went on behind his back, the stories that his wife was not the holy woman she appeared to be, that she had been wild in her youth, and that Joseph had been a big enough fool to go ahead and marry her while she was pregnant with another man’s child.

What an incredibly good man he must have been for God to choose him to raise God’s only-begotten Son! This was the man who first taught Jesus what it meant to be a man, as Jesus grew “in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” It was he who made sure that Jesus learned the Scriptures and that he worshipped the God of Israel, before he was old enough to understand who his real Father was. Joseph taught him to love honest work, to love the people of Israel, even the poor and sick, the blind and lame. He was the first man in the life of the Savior of the world. But it was not without great cost.

3. Look at your life this morning:

Longing for a normal life

What are *your* hopes and dreams as Advent gives way this coming week to Christmas? What are you longing for? If a messenger from God showed up in your room or in your dreams, what would he find you doing or dreaming of doing? Of course, we dream of those things that make life sweet: of the health and success of those we love, of times together around the table and around the fire, laughing and sharing the good things that God has so graciously provided. We long for peace, and for acts of terror and threats of terror to cease. We want what most people want, quiet lives of peace and prosperity.

The trouble with God’s favor

But what might it mean if a messenger were to speak God’s Word into our lives? How might such favor trouble our plans and dreams? Or, to put it less theoretically, what happens when you open yourself to the Word of God daily and listen to him speak his Word into your life? What new thing might he be calling you to do this next year with your time and talents and resources? Are you ready finally to begin addressing the various false selves that you show

the world, the masks behind which we all try to hide from ourselves, each other, and even the Lord, and to discover your true self, recreated in Christ Jesus?

Jesus Christ came into the world, not only to be born of Mary, but by his Spirit to be born again in you and me, to recreate us as the true self (what Paul calls the “new man”), the person in Christ that God wants us to be: living in intimate fellowship with him, doing the unique things he wants to do through us, being the unique people that he delights in and will enjoy forever.

The obedience of faith

The only sane response in approaching Christmas is to say from the heart what Mary said, and to do from the heart what Joseph did: To say, “I am the Lord’s servant; let it be to me according to your word,” and then to obey the voice of the Lord.

Conclusion

When we do that, rather than losing our dreams, we are finally given dreams worth dreaming, tasks worth accomplishing, and a life worth living. The false self (what the apostle Paul calls, “the old man”) begins to slough off, and the new, true self begins to emerge; our disordered and often frustrated dreams begin to clarify and focus on a life of love lived for eternity, on acts of love and mercy done quietly off-stage, where perhaps only God sees them.

We become, like those ancestors of Jesus whom Matthew lists in Jesus’ family tree, broken people through whom God continues to bring salvation into the world. As Bishop Phillips Brooks of Boston put it in his beloved Christmas carol:

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.