

Text: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Title: Don't Worry., Joseph

Date: December 19, 2010

One of the thing I really like to do is talk about theology. Not in a doctrinaire, check your brain in the door sort of way; but in what we believe and how we got there. I always have. So it probably shouldn't have been too surprising that when I started to wrestle with a call to ordained ministry, that when I asked Lynne what she thought of the idea, she said something along the lines of, "well, it's about time.." Anyway, the other day in passing, someone asked if it was necessary to buy into the virgin birth.

I've got to tell you, the Virgin Birth is one of those classic examples of when Theology gets in the way. In a way, theology acts like grammar. Long before there was English grammar, there were people speaking and spelling English. Sooner or later the people who wrote grammar came around and noticed that the letter I came before E, except after C- and that became a standard grammatical rule- except sometimes. In the same was we experience God's forgiveness, redemption, love and transformation long before we start thinking about how all of this stuff hangs together. And sometimes, we get in our own way.

The passage that the promise of the virgin birth comes from is in Isaiah- and its not originally about the messiah at all. Isaiah is sent to King Ahaz- Ahaz is not one of the good guys in the bible. He's basically a pagan, paying lip service to God but doing whatever he pleases. When he died they had to ritually clean the Temple as the dragged idols out from there. It got so bad that they could not in good conscience bury him in holy ground. Anyway, Ahaz is facing a number of military challenges, and is seriously considering appealing to the Assyrians for help. The Assyrians were the Hells Angels of the Ancient Near East. They might come and save you from your enemies- but who is going to come and save you from them? SO Isaiah comes and tells Ahaz to sit tight. You want a sign that God is faithful, go ahead ask for anything. Ahaz declines- Lord knows what is going to happen if HE asks for a sign- lightning bolts, flood or famine?

Isaiah says, no big deal- God is going to give you one anyway- and this brings us to verse 14. The NRSV gets it right, translates *elma* as young woman. She is going to

have a baby and name him Immanuel. Between the time he is weaned (curds & honey was considered the first solid food kids ate) and the time he can tell right from wrong, God is going to intervene for you in a dramatic way. the point of the Isaiah passage is that God will rescue His people based on His promises, and not on the performance of their King; for God keeps his promises.

That's all well and good. But when the OT was translated into Greek, the word they used for *elma* (young woman) was *parthenos* (virgin). The Early Christian church was quick to jump on this in their evangelism, for it tied into Mary's experience in Luke. Later on, it figured in the "just how is Jesus fully human and fully divine" debates. Don't get me wrong, I have no problem with the virgin birth, if the point is to demonstrate that God intervenes for us in dramatic over the top ways, having a virgin give birth is way up there on the list. But the best summation of the Gospel that I know of, John 3:16, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that anyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Great verse, for it highlights God's grace, Jesus' actions on our behalf and the fact that this is given to us through faith in God's promises. No mention of Mary anywhere in there one way or the other. but that hasn't stopped us from fighting over Mary over the centuries. I could go on and on about how various traditions have interpreted Mary and how we still argue about Mary- but that would only serve to take our eyes off the wonder of it all. For the Christmas story is all about wonder- the awesome realization that God intervened for us.

Matthew picks up the birth narrative by reminding us right off the bat of 4 things. It's like Charles Dickens in the Christmas Carol, "Marley was dead to begin with." If you don't understand that Jacob Marley was a ghost, then nothing else in the story will seem wondrous. We are told that **1)** Mary and Joseph are already engaged. For most intents and purposes they are already married. This is legally binding, the only way to get out of this is either by death or divorce. **2)** Mary is pregnant, presumably she has committed adultery. We already know about the Holy Spirit – but Joseph is clueless. He doesn't find out until an angel comes to explain it to him in verse 20. **3)** Joseph is aware that Mary is pregnant. And he is not sure what to do. According to Deuteronomy, this is a capital crime. By the First Century, the rabbis had softened that a bit, but the punishment would be severe and Mary would be humiliated. **4)** Joseph is described as

**dikaiois** righteous, presumably he would want to follow the law. Be we are told that he is not going to in this case, preferring to divorce Mary quietly.

Matthew tells us this because he wants us to be caught up in the wonder of God's intervention. Joseph has no clue, but God is going to change that. God sends an angel, we are not told who. The Angel opens up the way all angels seem to. "Do not be afraid...." Basically, don't worry Joseph, God is in control here. Mary has not been unfaithful, this child is by the Holy Spirit. Raise him as your own. And to that end, you are going to name him Jesus. Jesus is a form of Yeshua, which is a form of Joshua. It means, God saves, and that is exactly what Jesus is going to do. Jesus is going to save God's people not so much save them from the Romans as save them from their sins.

To highlight this wonder, Matthew harkens us back to Isaiah, and deliberately uses the Greek **parthenos** – virgin. Because we are heirs to the Greco-Roman intellectual tradition- we tend to get caught up with Mary's status as a virgin. But Matthew is not Greek, nor is he Roman. Matthew wants us to make the connections that Isaiah made- that our God is a God who makes and keeps promises and does so in unexpected and wonderful ways. For Matthew, God's character is revealed, not so much as Creator but as **Savior**.

Next Saturday is Christmas. I invite you, as we enter this last frenzied week of shopping, preparations and travel to take time, step back, and allow yourself to be caught up in the wonder of it all. God did intervene in Human history in order to fulfill His promises. God used the most unlikely, the most ordinary of characters to do this. God did this, not because we are nice and we deserved this- but because God loves us too much to sentence us to what we deserve. That God chose and continues to show us His grace, often in the actions of ordinary people, and sometimes even uses us to pass on His love. AS we open our presents, as we bask in the love of the people God has given us to love, reflect that this too is God's plan- and part of the wonder of it all.

Let us pray- and give thanks