

Advent 4A 2019 Sermon

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Most of what I will share with you this morning is an analysis of today's Gospel by Fr. John Shea.*

On the first Sunday of Advent, three weeks ago, we started a new liturgical year in which the majority of our Gospel readings, throughout this coming year, will come from the Gospel of Matthew. As you know, each of the Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – tells the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, through his own perspective.

Now, I admit this is a gross overgeneralization, but it might, nonetheless, be helpful to say that for Mark, Jesus was a miracle-worker; for Luke, Jesus was a prophet; for John, Jesus was the eternal Word become flesh; and for Matthew, Jesus was the new Moses, a new law-giver. Just as Moses gave the people God's law written on stone tablets, so Jesus gives a **new** law which is to be written on our hearts: a law characterized by love, forgiveness, and compassion.

Now, the Jewish Law was often referred to as a "yoke" laid on the shoulders of the people (Galatians 5:1, Acts 15:10), and the scribes and Pharisees often *made* this yoke very burdensome on the people. Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees... tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."

(Matthew 23:2-4) It is **only** in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and **I** will give you rest. Take **my** yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For **my** yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (11:28-30) He is speaking about **his** law of love.

And we can gain some insight into today's Gospel lesson if we **see** it through the lens of Joseph *struggling* with the Jewish religious law, which **could** be burdensome. We read: "When... Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." John Shea writes: "In [this] one line [Matthew] the storyteller sets the tension. Mary is officially *betrothed* to Joseph [which is a legal and binding agreement], but they have not had sexual relations. However, she is found to be pregnant. This is a scandal. Either she was raped or she had illicit sexual relations with someone else. However, the ...storyteller... tells the readers that the child in Mary's womb is the work of the Holy Spirit.

"...The work of the Holy Spirit emerges in human life as a scandal. During his life *Jesus* will be considered a scandal. He will challenge the prevailing understanding of the law, eat with tax collectors and sinners, and make claims that sound like blasphemy. However, what *looks* like a scandal on **one** level is really the work of God on a *deeper* level. Even as an embryo Jesus caused scandal. What can you expect when he grows up?" (p.) (unquote)

Matthew, the storyteller, then tells us, "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

Fr. Shea points out that, according to Jewish law, "Joseph is permitted to hold a public inquiry to determine **how** Mary got pregnant. But no matter what the finding of this public inquiry, rape or consensual sex, Mary's situation [will be] worsened. Her shame [will be] exposed in a public way. Joseph decides **not** to claim this right of the injured husband. He decides to break the marriage in as quiet a way as possible.

"In the storyteller's mind, this decision of Joseph makes him righteous. He is *sensitively* applying the law. He is **not** demanding public, legal exposure and punishment. In fact, he is trying to *save* as much of Mary's honor as possible. He is not **holding** Mary in her shame; he is trying to mitigate it. ...He is trying to respect the person and yet not undercut the purposes of the law.

"Of course, this struggle will be an ongoing tension of Jesus' ministry. He will declare the center of the law is love of God and love of neighbor (Matt 22:37-39). That center should flow through and interpret every particular law and how it is applied. But this is creative activity and difficult work... Joseph the carpenter is at work here, trying to **build** a response of love in a world of law. This man is an appropriate legal father for the child who will grow up and say the law should be fulfilled (see Matt 5:17-18), and with almost the same breath say, 'unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will *never* enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:20). The paradox is established: to *fulfill* the law you have to go *beyond* it.

“... Joseph never gets to carry out his righteous plan of ‘quiet divorce.’ [An angel appears to him in a dream and introduces] a **new** plan. ...In St. Matthew’s [story of the Wise Men and the star], Herod the king has to consult Scripture and priests to find out what God is doing. *Joseph* need only go to sleep, to move beyond ordinary waking consciousness and into deeper regions of awareness open to him. In other words, Joseph has direct, *personal* experience of divine intentions and activity.

“This fact establishes a tension between tradition and experience. What **tradition** labels *scandal*, **Joseph** is told to call *Spirit*. **Tradition** says to divorce her; the dream experience says to take her into his home. Of course, this foreshadows the tension of all who will hear and be drawn to Jesus. Is he a scandal to be rejected or a manifestation of Spirit to be welcomed?

“The essence of the angelic communication is that a deeper divine plan is at work and Joseph is part of it. His role is to shelter Mary and name the child ‘Jesus [which means “God saves”], for he will save his people from their sins.’

“St. Matthew tells his readers that this is all part of a plan. [We read: ‘All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”’] Through the prophet the Lord **said** this would happen and, behold, it *is* happening. ...St. Matthew is letting us in on God’s secret, the hidden divine plan...

“Matthew also supplies for us the *deeper* reason **why** Jesus will save his people from their sins. He is ‘Emmanuel—God with us.’ Forgiveness of sins is the **effect** of God’s presence. Therefore, the people who will call him Emmanuel... are those who *through* him have been liberated from the bondage of sin...

“This ‘God **with** us’ at the *beginning* of Matthew’s Gospel is matched at the *end* of the Gospel by the mountaintop Jesus saying, ‘I am **with** you always, to the end of the age’ (Matt 28:20). The deepest truth about Jesus is that he is *the presence of God* that does **not** depart even when he is no longer *physically* present. ...

“[Matthew tells us that] when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took [Mary] as his wife.

“[So much of the Bible is, in essence, about *hearing* the voice of God and *obeying*.] First people must *discern* the voice of God amid the cacophony of human noise. Then they must obey that voice, enact it in time and history. They struggle to make [present, in the here and now,] what they perceived in a moment of transcendence...

“Joseph wakes up. This means more than he arises from physical sleep. It means he now perceives the **divine** dimension of what is happening. Mary’s condition is

not scandal but **Spirit**, and so he takes her into his home. He embraces the truth of what is occurring and unites himself to it.

“This is the path of a righteous Jew becoming a follower of Jesus. They have to move from the perception of *scandal* to the perception of *Spirit*, from the perception that what is happening is **against** the God of Israel to the insight that what is happening is the [very **presence**] of the God of Israel.” Emmanuel – God with us. It is the very meaning of Christmas.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!

AMEN

*John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 43-48