

Christmas Day
Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1-12
Luke 2:8-20

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus. Amen.

Sometimes we feel - especially at this time of year - that the Christmas story of Jesus is so beautiful, so romantic and peaceful. We imagine cooing doves in the rafters, a beautiful young woman full of child... ahhh, all is right in the world...

But in reality it wasn't that way at all. You've heard it said before how giving birth in a stable was not a romantic, warm place but, full of smells, cold and damp. You try sleeping a night in a barn and see how you feel about it in the morning! But more than that, the beginning of Jesus' life is wrought with other things that smell - there is no pretty wrapping on this story no matter how you view it.

Joseph meets the love of his life and is waiting patiently to get married when it soon becomes obvious that *Mary, Mary isn't the kind of woman he thought she was*. We assume she is from a good, upstanding family in the community, how then is it that she ends up pregnant before she's married? The Gospels make it clear to us as it was clear to everyone then - Joseph isn't the father.

If this were to happen today you could just imagine the headlines: "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary, How Does your Baby Grow?" "Joe Decides to Go." Like any scandal, Mary's condition wreaks havoc on her parents, her fiancée, and even her community. It's hard enough to hide a baby but, then she's also got this crazy story to go with it... something about the baby being God's.

It was unbelievable and incredibly hurtful. Maybe it wasn't Joseph's integrity that made him want to dismiss her quietly, perhaps he was so ashamed by the whole thing, making a big deal out of it would only draw more attention to it all and he just wanted the problem to go away. It's a dark moment for Joseph; then while he tries to get some sleep an angel tells him to keep Mary and name the child "Emmanuel." A poorly timed joke when at the worst time in his life he's supposed to bring up a child with a name to remind him "God is with us." Joseph might have wondered "God is NOT in this!"

It's a scandalous beginning for a Savior's life.

Interestingly, it's usually in some scandalous, unexpected, unusual way that God comes to us. Thank goodness God doesn't use such tactics today! OR does he...

Think again about Joseph. He is stuck in the middle of a very difficult situation : he loves Mary and has set his future hopes and dreams upon taking her as his wife. All the signs point to her as the one, she's from a good family, she's of the age to marry, she's of the same faith, she's young, she's... just right. But even with all of these good things going for him, he is not able to overlook her condition. It's like he says "God, I've been a good and faithful servant, I've given offerings in the Temple, cared for my parents, kept the Law, and waited for the right woman but, BUT now you ask me to go where I cannot go. I've come as far as I could, been as faithful as possible but, this? No, I can't do this. If this is what you ask of me, then I can't follow you any further."

Joseph had met his limit – everyone has one – that one step further that you just can't take. God continues, to this very day, to push his followers to where they will not go.

Most of us can abide by things like don't steal, don't murder, and things like that. But God doesn't stop there. Like when he asks us:

- to trust in a God that we can't see, let alone prove.
- to believe God would come as a baby.
- to count on life after death.
- love and care for your neighbour the same way you love and care for yourself.
- Sometimes we might be asked us to sell a house, quit a job, help someone on the street.
- to give back a portion of our hard earned money.
- to make time for worship in the midst of our busy lives.

We're not all asked to take a leap like Joseph and believe our wife's pregnancy is an immaculate conception. Still, for all of us, at some point in our faith journey we come face to face with the moment where we might say *"No. If this is what following Christ means then I won't do it; I can't go that far."* We don't want to say anything bad about Jesus, we don't want to make a big deal about it but, we resolve to dismiss what God quietly asks just as Joseph quietly dismissed Mary.

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I remember when it came time during my seminary studies for internship. I said in prayer, and to the internship director, and to my colleagues, "I will go anywhere God wants me to go." And then I got word that I was to go to a large congregation in Calgary. And I said: "I will go anywhere EXCEPT to Alberta, especially Calgary!" I had visions of going to unexpected places, of going to exotic places, I was ready to do street ministry, go out of the country but, no I was being sent right back to where I came from. I got angry, I cried, I looked for options but, in the end I went. It was a very tough year but in the end a good year.

Two theologians, Jeff Krantz & Michael Hardin, put it this way: Jesus' life begins with scandal and in the end he dies in scandal

as a convicted criminal. And in middle, if we turn to Matthew 11:6 we find him saying "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (isn't offended by what I ask of them.)

In the call of discipleship there is always an element of offense, of difficulty, or resentment. It will always take us a step further than we want to go, to places we never wanted to see, to people we didn't want to meet, to do things we don't want to do.

When we are satisfied and comfortable in our faith God shakes us up and disturbs our peaceful lifestyle leading us to Bethlehem or any other place where we are out of our comfort zone. God with us even where we don't want to be, in what we don't want to do.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God in the womb, God in our homes, God here in the church, behind prison bars, in dirty alleyways, and aseptic hospital rooms. When we are in the darkest and most difficult moment remember the name: Emmanuel – even when nothing seems right, God *with you*.

Amen.