

Advent 4 / Matthew 1:18-25

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I pray it is the Gospel of Christ that is preached today and the very word of God that is heard.
Amen.

Good morning. The Gospel readings in 2 of the 3 years of our lectionary cycle, for the fourth Sunday in Advent, focus on Mary.

Last year, Luke told us the story of Mary and Elizabeth. Then, we heard these beautiful words from Mary:

“ My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Next year, Luke will again focus on Mary. It'll be story of Mary and the angel, Gabriel. Then we will hear these words from Mary:

“ Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Matthew's Gospel today is unique because Joseph is the star of the story. When we talk about Mary and Joseph, he's usually left in the background. In fact, I once heard about a little boy who was to play Joseph in his church's Christmas play. The boy came down with a very bad cold. His mom called the priest right away to let him know her son would have to miss the play. Joseph was promptly written out of the script. You know what happened? No one missed him. No one seemed to notice there was no Joseph in the Christmas story.

So, in our lectionary, when this reading comes around, every 3 years, I think 95% of the sermons preached today, will be about Joseph and the difficult choice he had to make.

Make no mistake about it. To say these were difficult choices might be an understatement. These were big life changing and potentially life ending choices.

Being a good man, the one Joseph makes is to divorce Mary quietly and hopefully spare her some shame and quite possibly her life.

He WAS a good and righteous man willing to go against Deuteronomic law.

Now, I have tried to imagine many times what it must've been like for Joseph to hear from his beloved that she was pregnant and that he was not the father.

I've tried to imagine Mary telling him how she became pregnant and the incredible act of faith on both of their parts.

But I think you've heard that sermon a time or two before and if you haven't, you probably will at some point in your life. We are taking a different turn today. Why?

Because, In my heart, I believe this Gospel is the ultimate call story. A call story about a good man who listens and does what he is called to do. And I also believe it is a story about us; all of us. Let me explain. God decided to come to us. In human flesh. He came to be like us. One look at Jesus's family tree, I think will prove my point. Here's what I mean.

This is the perfect time of year for us to talk about this because it is when we might gather together with family members that we don't often see. We might share family stories and talk about our family history. Now some of you may have had certain relatives in your home for Thanksgiving that are difficult to be with or maybe you expect them for Christmas. Maybe they're at your house right now or maybe you're flying to visit family.

Maybe you have relatives that wear "Make America Great Again" hats. Maybe you have relatives who

absolutely love Joe Biden. Maybe there is alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness or violence in your family history.

Everyone here has something in their family tree that we wish we could change. Let's take a peak at some of the greatest hits in Jesus's family tree.

Before we do, let me just say, one of the many things I love about this church, is that it is an Episcopal church with actual Bibles in the pews. I'm going to ask you, if you'd like to do so, to open up the Bible and turn to Matthew Chapter 1, verse 1.

Earlier when I proclaimed the Gospel to you we began on Chapter 1 verse 18. I'm taking you back to Chapter 1 verse 1:

"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah..."

This genealogy traces Jesus's ancestry all the way back to Abraham. We generally like to breeze right past this part. I mean, who wants to read all of those names? Who can even pronounce some of them? I appreciate your encouragement and patience with my Hawaiian pronunciation so, I won't make you sit through my pronunciation of all of these names. But, let's just stop for moment and take a look at just a few of them. Your wildest relatives have nothing on some of these folks.

There's Manasseh. He's sometimes referred to as one of the worst Kings Israel ever had. He'd definitely be considered a war criminal by our standards, as well as an idol worshiper.

Do you recall the story of Tamar and her father in law? This is a complex tale that we can't even tell (as my late mother would say) in polite company. You're going to have to look that one up for yourself.

How about David, Bathsheba and Uriah? What a tangled mess that story was.

And yet, God chose this family. THIS family. This line of imperfection brought a child into the world to be called, Jesus or God saves.

Emmanuel or God with us. To say that Jesus did not come from a line of perfect people would be quite the understatement.

And speaking of imperfection. There's me. You see, recently, I was feeling down and a bit overwhelmed. Have you ever felt that way? My daily routine is different, since moving here. My Sunday routine, is no longer familiar. I had loved my congregation and the clergy I served with, in California. The decades long support system of close friends and neighbors I have is there too. My clergy colleagues who I met with regularly are there too. I miss them all. I thought my son and his family would be here by now

but they're still in Singapore and may not ever move here, after all.

In the midst of all of this, trying to get settled and adapt to new surroundings, it felt as though I was juggling all of these balls in the air and dropping them right and left. I was mixing up calendar dates and just not paying close attention to detail.

Well, on this particular day, when I was feeling so low, a text came to me from the member of my staff that I had hired to take my place as Supervisor of the Spiritual Care Department of the hospital where I'd worked, California. I had LOVED that job. My role there was supervising the staff chaplains and supporting the hospital staff.

That text turned that day around for me. You see about a year ago a woman came into the emergency department with her teenager who'd intentionally taken an overdose. I'm going to be as vague as possible to protect their identities. The teen had been a brilliant student but was overwhelmed with school. There'd been some taunting and bullying from kids who were envious of this child's success and who were probably also envious of the support this child was receiving at home.

I spent most of that day with the mom, holding her hand and praying with her. We prayed a lot. We cried a lot. She is a single mom who works hard. Remarkably, on her own, she'd already put 2 children through college. Both of these children now have high level executive careers. She had high hopes that

this third child would also succeed.

I held her as we heard from doctors and staff about her child's condition. It didn't look good. The child would need to be flown by helicopter to another hospital for treatment and the prognosis was uncertain.

The child, we will name T, had not regained consciousness. Just before the helicopter was to lift off, we were permitted to see T in the e.d. bay. The teenager looked like a sleeping angel on the gurney. Such a beautiful child. The mom took my hand and said,

"Alberta I promise you this. T and I are going to walk through those doors someday and we are going to find you and you are going to know what an incredible child this is"

I hoped with all my heart that I would see them again, someday, and that all really would be well. I hoped for that everyday until my very last day on the job. You see, once they left the hospital, I no longer had access to the patient's chart, so I couldn't monitor the progress.

But I wondered. Oh, I wondered about them, many a night and day. Did T live or die? Had T suffered permanent brain damage or were they busy making plans for college? How was mom doing? They were often in my prayers. We moved here and I thought I'd never have an answer.

Well, back to this particular day, when I was feeling so down on myself. It was that day that I received this text from my replacement with a photo of T and mom.

The words of the text were this :

Quote" Hi Alberta! Hope you're doing really well. I miss you all the time, especially when something like this happens. Mrs. Smith brought her child T to see you. You made such an incredible impact on them, and they wanted you to know T is now an honors student, who is headed to college early. " End Quote.

There was more, in the text, but I don't want to give away any clues as to the identity of the patient, so I'll stop here.

I can only trace my family history back into the 1800's.

But, in my family history, there were not only enslaved people but slave owners too.

There are educators, people struggling with addiction, soldiers and folks in medicine and technology. People who've succeeded in many ways and those who struggle with daily life. All kinds of people. Not a perfect family. Just like Joseph's. Just like Jesus's. Although I am far from perfect, maybe, just maybe, by answering the call to serve, once in awhile I've made a difference.

Maybe, just maybe, once in a while I've done what I've been called to do. I hope so. As we begin a new calendar year, I look forward to being here with you and I look forward making new friends too.

As I told you, when we began, Jesus's family certainly wasn't perfect. Thankfully, God doesn't make that a requirement. I hope it helps you to know that. It certainly comforts me.

During these last days of Advent, I'd like you to consider, with YOUR imperfect family and YOUR imperfect self, Where are you being called? Where in 2023 will you serve? Because it is my belief, dear friends, That each week when our worship together here ends, that is the time, for OUR service to begin. Amen