

"Peace is found in Bethlehem"

December 8, 2013

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; 19 and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; 21 she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. (RSV)

I can not deny that I love the Christmas movies that are almost a constant TV special this time of year. I love the happy go lucky funny ones and the more serious ones that make me tear up and just feel all warm and fuzzy inside. When flipping through channels I started to notice a trend that almost all the Christmas movies on Hallmark and Lifetime have some sort of sweet happy ending romance to them and the majority of them seem to be about a woman with one child who meets a man falls in love and then everything ends up happily ever after. There is always a workable conflict and there is never a question of the new man in the woman's life accepting the child as his own. We see little to nothing of what that must feel like what that must be like. Always what we see is the resultant love and the bond and the happy ending where all is well and everyone is at peace with the new family's make-up.

Of course that is just a movie right? Not every new family is as easily formed and not every man or woman has it as easy to accept another's child as their own. We even have this example in our scripture story of today. Joseph. We come to the story of Joseph and his acceptance of Jesus as his son and this time we get the story from the perspective of Joseph.

To fully understand where Joseph came from in his actions we have to delve a little into the history of the Jewish faith and the concept of generations. If we turn to the beginning of Matthew we will come across the genealogy of Jesus which led from Abraham to Joseph. We have to remember that all of the Gospels were written with a specific audience in mind, they were not written as on the scene autobiographies but were rather written as biographies that told the stories of Jesus. Matthew wrote his gospel in the perspective of the Jewish faith and tradition. In that tradition lineage was extremely important. Your family shaped your status and your identity and who you came from often determined where you were going.

This can be a hard concept for those of us today to really dwell on. We no longer live with multiple generations in one household. We might interact with the various generations but not in the same way that the ancients did. Our lives today are not necessarily dependent on who our mothers and fathers are or were but rather our lives are dependent in many ways on what we can make of ourselves.

This was not how it was then. Knowing where you came from determined who you could be and what you were capable of doing a majority of the time. There were some exceptions of people being elevated in fact some of our favorite biblical characters like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Esther and Jonah were elevated out of their families and given tasks that were not considered normal.

Here today we have another Joseph, another man, who was given an extraordinary task. He is asked to take a woman to be his wife who is to give birth to a child who is not his own. His initial reaction is one we might expect. He had rather than have her exposed and stoned to death as was the custom of the time he was going to dismiss her quietly from her marriage contract. You see it might seem strange to us now but once a man and woman of this time were pledged to be married he essentially had all the rights and privileges of determining what would be done to her and with her. Once that contract was agreed upon by the two families the future husband's family could determine all parts of the future bride's life, it was no longer her parents' decision as to her fate. This is why what Joseph intended to do was actually more than fair. He was avoiding public shame and humiliation for both of them and allowing her family's honor to essentially remain intact.

And although we as biblical readers know that Mary had been visited by the Holy Spirit and was giving birth to God's son others did not have the same revelation that she had had. Unfortunately, too the word of a young woman was not given an extreme amount of credibility. But Joseph was visited by an Angel of the Lord who convinced him of Mary's righteousness and convinced him to keep Mary as his wife and to name the son to be born Jesus.

You see Joseph took his love for and from God and transferred that love to an unborn child who he knew was not his own. He obviously had some trepidation about doing so. It is not an easy thing to do. However, Joseph found peace in a difficult time and with a difficult decision. Peace was granted to him because he chose to trust in God's grace and goodness. Joseph believed in spite of doubts and insecurities that all would be well in the world. But we also have to consider that Joseph was really doing in his human fashion what God does every day to each one of us.

Finding peace with what happens in life is not an easy task. Many things disrupt our quest for peace. How many of us have moments of life that reach out and grab hold of us and propel us into something completely out of our comfort zones or things completely beyond our control? These events happen all the time in our lives, car wrecks, deaths, injury, illness, even unplanned pregnancies. All these and more can throw a curveball at us that we are not ready to swing the bat of life at but we have to anyway. Yet, God is not asking Joseph for instant acceptance of what was to come. God did not expect that of Joseph, God gave Joseph the necessary time it took to come to peace with what was to come and with what was happening to shake up his world. God called Joseph to accept and that acceptance set him free so he could be at peace.

Freedom from the burdens of our lives is what brings us peace. That is the peace found in Bethlehem. Freedom from the burdens of our lives is made possible because our belief in Jesus Christ who takes our burdens and does not take them away but rather carries them with us, helping us and strengthening us and granting us peace with whatever may come our way. Amen.