

Holy Days of Peace

December 7, 2014

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 struggled a bit with my sermon writing this week. You see it seems to be slightly ironic to preach a sermon on peace when our world is in such unrest and peace seems to be the last thing on anyone's mind. The news is flooded with protest, rioting, violence here in our own country and then worldwide it is the same. We often see the news one moment and form an opinion on what little we have viewed and then post our opinions on facebook or twitter or make our opinions known in conversation. This option of voicing ones opinion today is easy. We have access to seemingly so much information but it can be hard to decide where fact meets reality. We also will often form our opinions and give voice to our opinions very quickly often sparking debates or conversations leaving everyone a little dissatisfied.

I say dissatisfied because in debates of right or wrong no one truly wins. While we can consciously say for the majority of us that right and wrong are very clearly defined there are circumstances and situations that blur the clearly defined lines that we previously adhered to. We give excuse to circumstances or situations but that begs the question of who is the judge for when to bend the rules?

These are some of the tough questions and thoughts running through my head this week as I see many friends and colleagues making their opinions known regarding some of our nation's current events. As I see prayers for mercy, and justice given time and time again. These prayers both frighten and concern me because though I saw many such prayers or heard of them or read about them I saw few to no prayers for forgiveness and peace.

Here we are in the season of Advent awaiting and remembering the precious birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God and all we can focus on is justice and God's mercy. Justice means absolutely nothing if not tempered with forgiveness, grace, mercy, and most importantly peace. Justice then is just a politically correct term for revenge.

That might be a pretty radical statement but let us consider how often we have recently heard of prayers for God's justice to be rained down on the people? If you have paid any attention to the news, or seen some of the more divisive headlines that is the prevailing sentiment amongst Christians.

I might not know a lot about some stuff but I certainly am familiar with scripture and God's justice is some pretty intense stuff. From killing of the first born, to freeing people from centuries of slavery, to holes swallowing people in the desert, to entire populations being slaughtered for the People of God. God's justice is a dominating theme throughout the First Testament and perhaps that is why I get slightly confused. I fully recognize that we need to be aware of scripture in its entirety. To not is to discredit a big portion of our beliefs but some of the discredit is because Jesus does not discount God's Justice but asks us to see it differently.

Jesus the man whose birth we have come together to celebrate came to be born during a time we today can not comprehend. His birth was during a time of distinct class distinctions. A time when people were used and abused. A time of high taxes and a fractious government with a confusing agenda. A time when power was a very big struggle and agenda and the abuse of power was commonplace with little justice or equality for those not in power. Well, perhaps

we do comprehend though it is thousands of years later. It is interesting is it not that though the time may change the situations we find ourselves in are often the same?

Jesus though was born to be a beacon of Hope to the people in the darkness but he also came in interesting circumstances. Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph. Joseph was his earthly father and his indecision and very real humanity when faced with such circumstances as the birth of the Son of God show how truly Jesus was born into a very human family. And how parts of that family had to come to peace with his existence. That is important to note. In order to be transformed and to understand the hope that was being fulfilled Joseph had to gain peace with all parts of how that was to come about.

To gain peace we have to accept. To gain peace we have to accept the situation for what it is and forgive ourselves and others for what has already happened. Mary was having that baby no matter what Joseph could say or do. The Son of God was to be born and he was coming in nine months give or take. So you had to deal with it.

Joseph had a very humane reaction for that time. I say humane because he did have the option of stoning her to death for her apparent infidelity. He instead decided to set her aside quietly to not further shame both his own and her families. Some might wonder why Joseph had this decision instead of Mary's family. It happens that once one was betrothed the authority of the woman, who was often viewed as property, was handed over to her future husband's family though she still lived with her parents. Her future husband and his family would have a lot of say in how she was potentially raised or trained. So Joseph's reaction was humane to just set her aside quietly and not raise a fuss.

But then he encounter's God's angel coming to him and telling him he should not do this but take Mary to wife. He was asked to change his mind and reconsider his reaction. He did and he obviously accepted Mary and even went to be counted with her in the census. Though we hear little more about Joseph and his struggles with that decision or even his and Mary's early days of marriage before the birth of Jesus we know that Jesus was obviously accepted by Joseph even learning his trade of carpentry.

Joseph gained peace during a difficult time with a difficult decision going against all that he had been raised to believe. Going against what we have been raised to believe is difficult and sometimes downright impossible. We have talked about this concept theologically. Where what you were raised to believe in your faith life is your embedded theology and what you come to believe and accept through study and devote contemplation is your deliberative theology.

We have these same embedded understandings when it comes to almost everything in our lives. How we react to things that happen or occur, the opinions we form are often due to a mix of our embedded understandings and our deliberative knowledge. Our first reaction is not always our best particularly in the midst of life's difficult and unexpected situations.

Peace though is part of acceptance of these situations as inevitable and instead of bemoaning using them to glorify God.