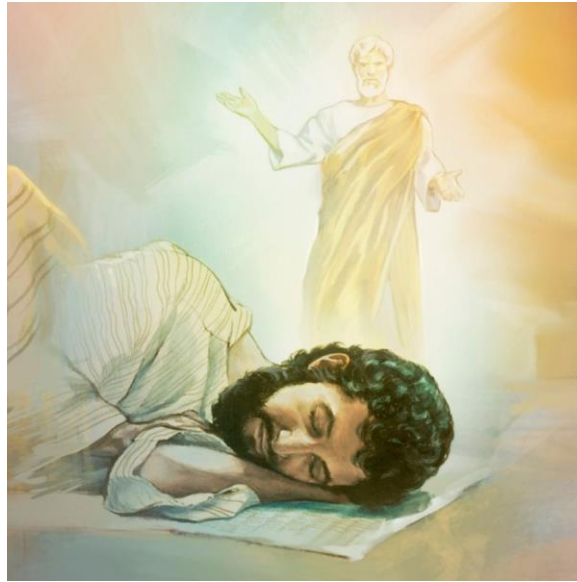


Sermon – December 12, 2021  
“Joseph’s Plan, God’s Plan, Joseph’s New Plan”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 1:18-25

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! Let me take a few minutes this morning and open the floor to anyone who would like to share their experience this past week of trying to provoke others to love, or share an example of where they were provoked to love. Remember not to embarrass anyone and not to share anything confidential. Would anyone like to share? <> My own attempts to provoke others to love this week were a day spent working on a house that needs so much work and repair to be lived in, yet houses six people. I am uncertain if I was successful in provoking those who live in the house to love. I was able to work with several others to correct some of the physical problems in the house making it a safer place, but I am uncertain if we were successful in provoking those living in the house to love. I did receive a thoughtful, loving gift this week which provoked me to love. I was also blessed to sit with the Hancock family this week and hear

their stories about Marty. It was a time when I experienced a lot of “provoking to love” and caught a glimpse of the love for each other that is alive in the Hancock family.

Does anyone know what time it is? According to my watch it is XX:XX on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December. Only twelve more shopping days till Christmas. It is also the third week of Advent. Only one more Sunday in Advent before we celebrate the arrival of the Christ child, the reason for the season. It is also time for us to wake up! During the first two weeks of Advent, we focused on the return of Christ. In the last two weeks, we are moving our focus to the first coming of Christ, or Christmas, and the incarnation of God into human flesh.

You may have noticed that today’s theme is repentance. Repentance means to turn around and go in the opposite direction, a direction that is towards God. Often the idea of repentance is championed by John the Baptist’s appearance in the wilderness and his fiery preaching. As those who respond to John’s preaching repent, they prepare a highway for the coming of the Lord. Another story of repentance and preparing for the way of the Lord is found in the New Testament in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew writes about Joseph and his repentance in the first chapter of his Gospel. Let me give a little context for this morning’s scripture reading. Just prior to this account about Joseph is a long genealogy that traces Joseph’s lineage from David. If we take time to read this genealogy and study the names, we will discover that those in Joseph’s lineage are not just Jewish men, but include women and Gentiles, those who are not normally considered part of the lineage of a Jewish ruler. Their inclusion speaks to a coming kingdom’s inclusive nature that will extend beyond Israel to all of the nations.

Another helpful background point is for us to develop a better understanding about marriage in first century Judea. Marriage then had two parts. The first was an engagement period that lasted about a year in which the couple is considered to be married, but have not yet begun to live together as husband and wife. The second part of a marriage begins with the couple’s “coming together,” an event highlighted by a celebration in which the bridegroom goes from his house to the house of his wife and brings her back to his house to live. It is the time when the couple begin to have a normal marital relationship. Once the couple was engaged, they could only be separated by death or divorce. Infidelity would end the marriage contract that the husband had agreed to with the father of the bride. The charge of infidelity would also result in a public trial, and, at one time, if the spouse was found guilty, it would result in the stoning of the guilty party. However, by the first century in Judea the Romans had eliminated the death penalty

for most offenses, and so divorce and public shaming were the more common outcome of infidelity during the engagement period or during marriage after the couple had come together. Another option available was for the couple to divorce privately in front of two witnesses and avoid the public trial and shaming. In a small community like Nazareth, it would be difficult to keep secret the ending of an engagement, but it is another option available to a couple.

Matthew does not tell us the details of how Mary's pregnancy is made known to Joseph, just that Joseph is aware, and is a righteous man, one who strives to keep and live by God's law. Because he has honored the conditions of the engagement contract, Joseph knows that the child is not his and assumes that Mary is pregnant by another man and has been unfaithful to him. Joseph may have considered taking Mary as his wife, but does not see that option as honoring God's law. Joseph's conclusion is that Mary has been unfaithful to him and as a result is pregnant. He is convinced she has not honored their engagement. Yet, it is clear that Joseph still cares for Mary as he decides to avoid a public trial and instead chooses the option of a quiet divorce with no public trial and public shaming. Joseph's choice is a righteous choice, a choice consistent with God's law and a choice that shows some compassion and mercy for Mary. Joseph's choice is a righteous and merciful response to their situation. Having weighed the options and made this decision, righteous Joseph tries to rest and goes to sleep.

God has another plan for Joseph and Mary. In a dream, God sends a messenger to Joseph to give him needed guidance about God's plan. This is not a dream such as we experience, with wild, strange thoughts and happenings. This dream gives Joseph clear communication from an angel, a messenger from God. This will not be a dream that one might be able to remember some of the strange details, but it is a dream that is clear, will be remembered in every detail, and leaves Joseph better informed and with a choice of whether to obey God or not.

Let's look at Joseph's dream this morning. The angel tells Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Joseph's fear is not from the appearance of an angel, but of the public shame of a wife who was unfaithful to him. Joseph is not to have fear of such shame, as Mary has been faithful and is highly blessed by God. Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife. The angel gives Joseph assurance that Mary has been faithful to him and that the child she carries is not from her infidelity, but the action of the Holy Spirit. This is the same Spirit that was present at creation and its action in Mary's life points to the coming of a new creation through the child she now carries. Joseph is told that Mary will bear a son and that he is to name the child Jesus.

This is a name that was given by many first century parents to their Jewish sons at this time as they found hope in the name Jesus as pointing to a coming Messiah who would free Israel from Rome and lead them again to become a great independent nation. The name Jesus means, “one who saves.” And finally, in the dream, Joseph is told the mission Jesus will have, to save his people from their sin. This is the purpose of Jesus’ life that Matthew will amplify throughout his Gospel.

Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7:14 which reads, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” If we look at Matthew’s quotation of this verse, we will find he makes one small change to the text from Isaiah. He adds the word “they”. This addition allows Matthew to move the naming from the young woman or virgin to a broader source of naming, and the angel tells Joseph he is to name Mary’s son, Jesus. The text becomes “Mary the virgin will bear a son and (They) will name him Emmanuel” And Matthew reminds us that Emmanuel means “God is with us.”

Notice that when Joseph wakes up, he does as the angel commanded him. The duplication of the angel’s words in Joseph’s actions drives home the importance of this command and the change in Joseph’s direction. Joseph’s planned righteous solution to their situation changes from divorcing Mary to taking her as his wife and naming her son Jesus. This action of naming Jesus by Joseph adopts Jesus into Joseph’s family. It is a claiming of Jesus as Joseph’s son and, as a consequence of Joseph’s action of naming Jesus, Jesus is adopted into the line of David, fulfilling scripture. Joseph’s plan was one he thought kept God’s law and extended mercy to Mary. God’s plan is one that brings forth something new, a child born to a virgin who will save his people from their sin. Jesus’ name means one who saves; Emmanuel means God is with us. Jesus is God with us, God in the flesh, God incarnate who comes to save his people from their sin. Joseph goes forward obediently toward God and takes Mary as his wife, unafraid of the consequences. Joseph is moving in a new direction, one that is toward God and God’s plan. Joseph’s actions demonstrate his repentance and his obedience to God. Joseph’s repentance is far more than behavior modification; it is a reordering of Joseph’s life with God’s plan. This repentance is Joseph realizing he is being invited into God’s plan, turning from the righteous direction he had decided to follow, and instead following God by moving in the direction God’s plan will take him, even if that means he must live with the shame of a community that will think

he has failed to honor his engagement contact with Mary. The immediate response from Joseph when he wakes up is to take Mary as his wife and to name her son Jesus, adopting Jesus into the line of David. Joseph knows what we know, that God is Jesus' Father, and Joseph is not ashamed to take Mary as his wife and give the name the angel gave him to Mary's son, adopting Jesus into his family, the line of David. The fruit that Joseph's repentance bears is that Jesus will become God with us, Emmanuel and will grow up to bear the fruit of saving his people from their sin. Joseph's repentance brings forth the fruit of repentance that will bring in the kingdom of God.

What is our response to Joseph's repentance? Don't expect an angel to show up in our dreams and speak to us, giving us a new direction for our lives. We have God's word, the account of Joseph's example of hearing God's message, repenting, turning in a new direction and moving towards God. Our response is to read God's word, the Bible, and to wake up to God's message to us found there, and then as awakened people, to move toward God. In this season of Advent, we are to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us through God's word, Jesus the Word made flesh, and to wake us up to following Jesus, to growing into his image. If we will ask the Holy Spirit to guide us and dare to look deep inwardly into our hearts, not for behavior modification, but for a complete turning to God, we too will receive directions from God addressing where we have fallen asleep and need to repent, and we will be enabled to turn to God in obedience following His direction found in God's word. Don't expect an angel in our dreams. Expect the Holy Spirit to guide us to our need for deep inward repentance and to new direction in our lives from the truth of the Word of God. Like Joseph, we are to receive God's command to love one another, repent where we have failed, turn to God and follow God's command, even if it is not what we see as the righteous path forward.

At the end of this birth account in Matthew, Joseph, who has repented, turns to God and is following God's plan. Joseph takes Mary as his wife and names Mary's son Jesus. By Joseph's yielding to God's message, Jesus is brought into the world, we are given a child who will save us from our sins, who is Emmanuel, God with us, and is present in the fullest possible form, God in the flesh, a child who comes as Jesus to save his people from their sin and is God with us. As a result, we all reap the fruit of unfailing love.

*Pray with me: Holy Spirit, we confess we are too often those thinking they are awake but who are actually asleep. Come, Holy Spirit, and wake us up from our slumber that we might encounter Jesus in God's word, repent from our sin, and turn and follow Jesus as our savior.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and wake us up from our slumber that we might turn to God and obediently live as awakened people saved by Jesus who are living to reap the fruit of unfailing love right here, right now. Amen*