

“God is With Us”
 December 2, 2016
 Friday Evening House Tour Service
 Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
 and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
 which means, “God is with us.”*

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Introduction

Community. We all have a basic need, which is to live in community. We are truly blessed to be in a beautiful community here in Island Heights and its surrounding area. Some of us are new, some of you have been here all your lives. Some have been away and have now circled back. Some are visitors who drop in from to time. In any case, it's our community, it's where we interact with each other, it's the setting where we live our lives.

Now, we have just heard the gospel according to Matthew, which begins with the birth of Jesus. And right away we are in the middle of a scandal; the scandal that would set in motion the single most history-changing event of all time. Matthew writes:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

Joseph—a man in a tough spot. A righteous man. A man of good reputation, someone respected in the community. This scandalous situation will damage all of this. And yet, he refuses to shame Mary. While protecting his own standing, he will not compromise her place in community either. So, sadly, but out of necessity, he plans to end his relationship with her in private. Reputations will remain intact, the circle of community will remain unbroken.

The Dream

Not a bad plan. Just not God's plan. Because, as Matthew tells it,

Just when Joseph resolves to do this, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

God is stepping into humanity, and Joseph is the first to hear this good news—that this child will save people from their sins; that he must name the child Jesus, which is the Greek translation of the original Aramaic name Yeshu'a, which means "God saves."

In this dream it all comes to Joseph. An angel of God speaking of the Holy Spirit conceiving a child named Jesus. And here, in one of the earliest writings of the New Testament we see it—the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—that eternal mystery, which is now fulfilled in the advent of Jesus the Christ. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; three in One, One that is yet three. A community unto itself; a perfect circle of Divinity. A community of love that models for us what it means to live in our own human community.

Ancient Prophecy Fulfilled

It's an old, old story, this story we tell. The birth of Jesus was long awaited. For centuries; since the fall of mankind, really. Jesus's coming is an ancient prophecy fulfilled. According to Matthew,

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Earlier, Steve read from the ninth chapter of Isaiah. If you turn back another two chapters in Isaiah, you will find the verses Matthew is referring to where Isaiah is reassuring the worried Judean King Ahaz that God has a plan: Isaiah 7:10-14:

The Lord spoke to Ahaz saying, ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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."

Emmanuel. God is with us. Hear the good news: Jesus is God. The ancient prophecy is fulfilled.

Joseph's Obedience

Then the dream is over. And Joseph wakes up. What just happened?! Was it real? Or was it just a dream? But then the miracle begins to unfold. Joseph wakes up, *really* wakes up for the first time. His eyes are now open and he understands something he has never understood before. It is his hour of belief. Matthew writes,

When Joseph awakes from sleep, he does as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he takes Mary as his wife, but has no marital relations with her until she bears a son; and, in a final confirming act of obedience, he names him Jesus.

And just like that, God is with us.

Our Mission in Advent

From the moment it all began in Bethlehem to today, God is with us, and is known as Jesus. The name above all names.

Tonight we take time to consider what it means to live in community in which we believe “God is with us.” Notice that all around us are wreaths. The wreath is a reminder of the circle of community, and a reminder of the Trinity—that Holy community where the love between the Father and the Son is manifested in the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit continues to interact in our lives and in the life of our community. The Spirit was here when Island Heights was founded in the 1800’s. The Spirit was here when this church was built in 1925. The Spirit was here when many of you were baptized here at this altar, when some of you were married here, where some of your loved ones were memorialized here. Through it all, God has been with us. And tonight, God is with us. And tomorrow at the 33rd annual Island heights House Tour and Craft show, God will be with us.

We all have a deep need to live in community. And our life in community is lived out as expressions of “God is with us.” So, I encourage you to be good hosts. May everyone you encounter tonight, tomorrow, and all your days know that you have awakened to the reality of Emmanuel, as you welcome them one and all as if you are welcoming Jesus himself. Amen.