

In the name of the Father and of the ✝Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who are eager for Christmas to be here, today is your lucky day. At least as far as the lectionary is concerned. Our lessons this morning, including the psalm, all point us directly to the birth of Jesus. Of course, Matthew's birth narrative is nothing like Luke's account. In many ways, Matthew is the Joe Friday¹ version—just the facts, m'am.

But in “just the facts,” we hear some important messages to the world today. We hear a message that most in the secular world have simply ignored, and some even call “old fashioned” or “out of date.” 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.” ([Matthew 1:18](#)) Note the sequence of events here. *First*, Mary and Joseph were engaged, *and* they were not living together. *Then*, Mary became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. How often do we hear this pattern proclaimed in the media? All too often, it's something like, “Starlet A has given birth to her third child with Athlete B, who has three children from previous relationships.”

Now, in the time of Jesus' birth, this really wasn't “news.” Men and women didn't live together without the benefit of marriage. Premarital sexual relationships were forbidden under penalty of death or banishment. Obviously, there was some reason that this was included in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. Remember, Matthew's gospel was a proclamation of Christ to the Jewish community—those who grew up and lived under the same Law as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself, so they didn't necessarily need to be reminded of this fact of life in their times. So then, why does Matthew say this?

Perhaps the next verse gives us a clue. “[Mary's] husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” ([Matthew 1:19](#)) They weren't yet married. Joseph had every right to make a very big public scene about Mary's apparent infidelity. If Mary had been attacked in the open country, the law specified that she would not have been punished. However,

¹ As my youngest would say, “Geezer Alert!” Joe Friday, for those too young to know, was the detective sergeant in the Los Angeles Police Department made famous by Jack Webb in the 1950s and 1960s television series, “Dragnet.” Most folks missed the 21st century remake (thankfully)

if there were no evidence of that, she would be stoned to death, along with the man with whom she had slept, assuming it wasn't Joseph. ([Deuteronomy 22:22-27](#)).

Joseph didn't want anything to happen to the woman he loved, so he planned to be very quiet and discrete, allowing Mary a chance to live, even if it would be in another place, far from her home. Today, our fictional news report might have included something like, "The couple, who have lived together for several years, has no plans for a wedding." But for Joseph, living with Mary outside of marriage was not an option any more than marrying her while she was pregnant. Both would have led them to be excluded from the community at best and executed at worst. So, Joseph sought to make things right by doing what he felt was best for all three of them—Mary, the child, and himself.

But God has other ideas, of course. Just as the angel came to Mary, Joseph was also greeted by the messenger of God in a dream. "Chill out, Joseph. Go ahead with the wedding and make Mary your wife. This is all part of God's plan. The child is truly a 'love child,' conceived by the Holy Spirit, and not by a man. The child, whom you will name Jesus, will save everyone—even you and Mary—from sin." And when Joseph woke up, he did exactly as the angel had instructed.

Now, Matthew doesn't give us a timeline, but it's probable that these two angelic visits came rather close together, and perhaps the wedding date was in close proximity as well. So, with no one other than the two of them knowing all of the details, the birth of Jesus came at the right time—nine months after the wedding. And, by the power of the Holy Spirit no doubt, no one learned of the details. And the rest is, as they say, history.

But what are we to take from this Gospel text and the other lessons that accompany it? Is this a Sunday on which we are to hear "Don't have premarital sex" or "Having children out of wedlock is wrong," or even "Stay with the mother of your child"? In some churches, you might hear these, and maybe even harsher messages. Yes, we do have a biblical pattern for relationships, marriage, and procreation in these lessons. But it is *not* the primary message we are called to hear this morning.

We are called to hear a message of faithfulness and fidelity. Joseph, a righteous man, is called by God to be faithful to his fiancée, even though Joseph has every reason under the law—the law by which he is called righteous, by the way—to break off the engagement. But he hears

from God's own messenger that his fidelity to Mary and the unborn child is of greater importance than his faithfulness to the law. In fact, by his fidelity to Mary, Joseph is also showing his faithfulness and fidelity to God, and Joseph has his place in God's plan of salvation for the world.

As we await the Nativity of our Lord, we are bombarded with messages from the secular world that call out to us to forget about the sacredness of these days. Buy, buy, buy and spend, spend, spend. It's all about what we get and what we give. If we're lucky, we *might* see a nativity scene in the card store or hear a sacred carol through the loudspeakers at the mall, but that is about it. And as we are gathering our groceries for the family feast, how many of the tabloid headlines and celebrity magazines are touting the latest birth of some star couple who will never be married to one another? Where is the message of faithfulness and fidelity?

Joseph, the guardian of our Lord, was a man of faith and fidelity. He had no clue what God had in store for him, a simple carpenter who just happened to be a descendent of the great king David. He simply wanted to marry this wonderful young woman who lived in his community, have a bunch of kids, grow old, and give praise and glory to the Lord Most High. Little did Joseph know, at least until the angel appeared to him, that God had a more important role for him. Joseph was to be the guardian of the Son of God, Yeshua, or "the one who saves."

Indeed, it is little Yeshua who is Emmanuel, "God with us," as we journey in fidelity and faithfulness these last days of Advent, awaiting the coming of the child, even as we await the return of the King of kings.