

## “Pattern of God’s Promises for Love”

### Matthew 1: 18-25

Finally we made it. We have made it to Bethlehem to witness the birth of the Christ Child. For weeks, we have been anxiously awaiting this moment and now it is finally here! I don’t know about you but each year when we reach this point on our Advent journey, I’m never sure which of the birth narratives found in the Gospels that I like best. To help us decide, let’s take a few moments and see what each one has to offer us as people of faith.

To start with, we can eliminate the Gospel of Mark from the birth narrative conversation. He doesn’t have one. Mark instead starts his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus. Then next, we have John’s Gospel, which yes, I’ll admit, there is truly something awe-inspiring about the way his Gospel opens. But it really isn’t a birth narrative per se. His opening is more like a theological conversation setting the stage for Jesus’ ministry, you know the whole light verses the dark and the Word of God made Flesh, coming to dwell among the people of God. So let’s save John’s Gospel for Christmas Eve to help add to the drama and mystery of that particular night.

So this leaves us with Luke’s and Matthew’s version of the birth narratives. Both of these stories have unique themes and emphasis. Luke’s version of the birth

story has shepherds and great rejoicing at the angels' message of Peace on Earth and goodwill to all humankind. But Matthew's version of the birth story has its own merits as well. In Matthew's version, we get Joseph's side of the story, Joseph the person who is just a blip on the radar for Luke but for Matthew, he becomes one of the main actors. Joseph, not Mary, is the one making the decisions, Joseph, not the shepherds are the first to hear the good news. In Matthew's version of the story, Joseph is more than a figure head. He is the one through whom the connection to the line of David is made, making him a significant player in the drama.

And yes, who can forget that in Matthew's Gospel, there are angels as well. However this angel doesn't come proclaiming peace for all. Instead, this angel of the Lord comes to tell Joseph, and only Joseph, of God's great plan.

This, of course, puts Joseph between a rock and a hard place. He knows what the Law calls for him to do, put Mary aside. Joseph also knows that this very action will probably send Mary and the baby into abject poverty, after they are shunned and ignored by the whole community. Now come on, really, who wants to be the one responsible for that?

So Matthew continues with the intrigue by having the angel tell Joseph to do something extraordinary, something unprecedented, something that in all honesty,

probably made Joseph look like a naïve fool to the rest of the community. The angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife and to name the baby Jesus. Now you know Joseph had to breathe a sigh of relief at that suggestion. Because now, because of this visit with the angel, a door of grace had been opened not only for Mary and the baby but for Joseph as well. This gift allowed him to fulfil what he interpreted the heart of the Law to be while remaining faithful to his God. I'm mean come on... Matthew's version of this story has it all...deception, intrigue, mystery, grace.

How do we decide between Luke's or Matthew's version of the story? How do we choose which one to read on this Christmas Sunday?

Well, I'll be honest, for me, I decided to go with Matthew's version this year because a) it has been a while since we have heard it used as a Gospel text during an Advent Season. I know I checked and b) well, I chose Matthew's version this year because I found myself resonating with it more.

Let me explain: With all the stuff going on in our world these days, from the bombings in Aleppo, to the protests against the Dakota Pipe Line, from the heroin epidemic that is overwhelming our community right now to all the very real fears and worries that fill our lives day in and day out, I found myself resonating more and more with Matthew's version of the birth story because you see, it hides

nothing. It tells you all the details and doesn't pretend to be something it is not. It is not a cleaned up G rated version. It is the down and dirty honest and vulnerable truth about how our God came down to be among God's people to complete the pattern of promises for love.

You see, Matthew's version is not really about the birth. In fact, the birth of Jesus only gets about two lines in the Gospel according to Matthew: the very first line which tells us "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" and the very last line which says, "but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

The reminder of Matthew's story is about the people, people who were living in uncertain times, facing uncertain circumstances. It is about people who were called to place their trust in God, people who were called on to find the strength and the courage to hold onto the hope found in the promises of God. Matthew's version of this story is the true and vulnerable reality about people, people just like you and me, who have experienced, who continue to experience a way out of the darkness, people who have come to know the love and grace of God.

What put Matthew's version of the story in the lead for reading on this Christmas Sunday this year was that is about the messiness of life. It is about the relationships that get caught up in, that get broken, that get damaged by this messiness that we have all experienced in our own lives. I don't know about you but this year, especially with everything going on in our world, in our nation, in our very own community, I find myself being drawn to Matthew's version of the birth narrative because ultimately it strips away the pretenses, leaving us with the very real reminder that God can work, that God does work through the messiness of life to about bring healing and wholeness for all of God's creation. And in the midst of all the hurt, all the brokenness, in the midst of all the fears and worries that are surrounding us right now, I can think of no better Christmas message that we need to hear as we prepare for the coming of the Christ child.

As people of faith, Matthew knows that during this time of seemingly overwhelming darkness, we need to hear that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Matthew knows that we need to be reminded again and again that love has the power to overcome any darkness that comes our way, through gift and grace of God. He knows that we need to know that God is in the process, this world will not have the last world. Matthew knows

that as people of faith we need to hear that in spite of everything, we need to hear that God is in control, just like his community did over two thousand years ago.

So Matthew goes about doing just that, leaving nothing to chance. He wants this message of love to come through loud and clear to his readers, so he methodically puts together his version of the birth story so that will do just that. He starts by playing on the themes from the prophets from long ago. He even specifically chooses the Isaiah text, the very text that tells us the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, the very text that names the child “Emmanuel, to support his story. He does not want us to miss the fact that at no time, has God ever forgotten or forsaken God’s people, not even when it was the darkest time for the people. And God is not about to start now.

Then next, Matthew begins his Gospel by tracing the lineage of David, starting with Abraham, making a connection to Joseph so that we as the readers would not, could not miss that this child is the promised Messiah, that this child is the fulfillment of God’s love for God’s people. This message of love is too important for us not to get it. So from the very beginning of his opening lines, Matthew leaves nothing to chance.

He even chooses specific names for this child, because after all, this is no ordinary baby. This is Jesus, the one who will save God’s people, the very one who

reminds us time and time again that God is with us. This is the one that the prophets talked about long ago, this is the one who will kindle the light of hope in our hearts, this is the one who show us how to be the people God created us to be.

Matthew leaves nothing up to chance so he deliberately and methodically makes a connection for us as readers, makes a connection between the promises of Emmanuel which means “God with U” , the promises of Jesus which means “God is our Salvation” to this very child, this very one who has come embodying the promises of God for the people of God.

For Matthew, for Matthew’s community, and for us as people of faith, this child brought forth in the messiness of life, brought forth to very real, very vulnerable people, this child brought forth in the midst the of hurt and brokenness of the world becomes a sign that God is about to do something new, that God has come to ease the fears and worries of God’s people during these uncertain times, that God has not forsaken or forgotten God’s people.

For Matthew, this child is a promise, is THE promise that completes, that fulfills the pattern of all of God’s promises, promises that inspire hope in our hearts, promises that offer peace to our troubled minds, promises that dwell within our very souls with love. This child is the message of love that we cannot miss because now all the rest of the promises are now rolled up into one big promise, a

promise that leaves nothing to chance, a promise that is a big flashy neon sign in the midst of the darkness that tells us as people of faith, that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Our God is with us. Our God will save us. Our God is still guiding us, leading us. Our God is still at work in this world in the midst of the messiness of life bringing healing and wholeness, not just for you and me, but for all of God's creation. As people of faith, this is all we ever need to know. That in these uncertain times, as we face uncertain circumstances, we can trust and believe in this one promise. We can know that it comes from our God, our God who loves us so much that God gave his only Son so that we might live, our God who faced the pain of the cross so that we might have eternal life.

Our God left nothing up to chance... Time and time again, our God has shown us that we are loved more than we will ever know. Our God has told us that we are loved more than we can imagine. Time and time again, our God has left nothing up to chance. Our God has methodically and decisively named us and claimed us as God's very own since the beginning of time.

You know, as I have lived with Matthew's version of the birth narrative this week, I was reminded that one of the many things I love about this season are the stories, the stories that remind us of our connection to each other as brothers and sisters, the stories that tell of our connection to each other as human kind. What I love about this time of year are the stories that remind us that we are called to see beyond the surface and look with eyes of love so that we can see the image of God that resides in the hearts of all that we encounter and meet.

Not only do we find these stories in our Bibles, like the one from our text in Matthew today but it seems like especially this time of year, they are always around us, finding us in our everyday lives. This week as I was preparing this sermon, I came across stories about a policeman whose gift allowed a young girl achieve in school to another story about a team of students who created a car that provides independence for children who have limited mobility due to paralysis or disorders. I discovered a story about how a young boy decided to pay it forward after his bike was stolen not once but twice by donating money to an organization that provides bikes to children who would not be able to otherwise have them and another story about another young boy who donated half of all his birthday and Christmas presents to a local hospital after realizing many children would spend their Christmas there. He went on to found the Little Saint Nick Foundation whose mission is to make hospitals more kid-friendly for the young patients.

There were so many great stories that I was reminded that God's love doesn't just work in one season. It is at work all the time in our world, bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's people. It is with us each and every day in small and extraordinary ways. It is constantly stripping away the pretenses, alleviating us of our fears and worries and reminding us that God will always have the last word in our world.

I don't know about you but today and every day, this is the message of hope, the message of peace, the message of joy, the message of love that I always need to hear. As people of faith, I need to know, we need to know that God meets us in the midst of the messiness of life, showing us time and time again, that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." What better story is there than that! Amen.