

"Can You Believe This?"

Matthew 1:18-25

December 18, 2016

4th Sunday of Advent

Hey, how about this weather we're having? Can you believe it? We say this every year when it gets bitterly cold outside. I'm always surprised when I hear it. We act as if it's something new or something out of the ordinary. People, it's Montana! It's December! So, while the weather may be a bit extreme now, we believe in it, even if it's difficult and we don't want to accept it.

Isn't that the way it is with God? God does wonderful things. Yet, we seem surprised every time we hear about them, even though God has done many wonderful things in the past. We may find them difficult to accept and hard to believe. That's what Joseph found to be true in our text for this morning.

I believe that we overly romanticize the accounts of Jesus birth in the Holy Scriptures. We act as if it is a sweet and easy story to accept and believe. We see that reflected in the in the pictures and nativity scenes which we look at all the time. Here's how it goes: an angel comes to a young girl named Mary and says, "Mary, you are going to have a baby. He is the Son of God and the Savior for the world." Mary says, "Oh good, I accept that." Mary goes to Joseph and says, "Joseph, I'm going to have a baby with the help of the Holy Spirit." Joseph says to Mary, "Oh good, I believe that. Let's go down to Bethlehem and register for the census." So, Mary and Joseph take a quick and easy trip to Bethlehem. They find a place to stay in a brightly lit and warm stable. Mary gives birth to a son, wraps him in warm clothes, and puts them in a clean manger with lots of soft hay.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Mary did not easily accept the role as the mother of Jesus. She didn't understand the biology of the matter since she was a virgin. She likely understood the social impact it would have to be an unwed mother at that time. It meant shame, rejection, and the possibility of death by stoning according to Mosaic Law.

Imagine poor Joseph! To find his fiancée pregnant before they were married was the greatest shame which he could experience at that time. And, to think that the best story she could come up with to explain her situation was that an angel visited her and told her that the Holy Spirit would be responsible for her pregnancy, was even more humiliating. However, the text says that he was a just man. That meant he couldn't accept Mary as his wife. However, he was also a merciful man. Instead of humiliating Mary with a messy public dissolving of their betrothal or even having her stoned to death, he decided to divorce her privately and send her away quietly. All things considered though, Joseph reacted pretty well. I mean, seriously, how could Joseph possibly believe anything that Mary told him? All of this talk about a Savior was too fantastic to accept and the way He would enter the world was too hard to believe.

Have you ever felt like Mary or Joseph in this regard? God comes to us with some pretty fantastic stories and wild promises. He tells us that, even though He is the Almighty God who created all that exists in the universe, He knows each of us personally and loves each of us individually, even though we are but specks riding on this tiny blue dot called earth throughout the universe. He promises us that, even though we are weak and die, He has a way for us to live forever with Him in a fantastic place which He has prepared for us. Talk about hard to believe stories! We have just as hard of a time believing this as Joseph did in believing a story about a Baby Savior who comes via a divine pregnancy.

God intervenes to help Joseph believe. He sends an angel, a divine messenger, with a divine message that confirms Mary's story. The angel says, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Mary was telling the truth and now Joseph can believe because of this message from God.

What exactly is the message? It is a message of divine salvation for the people of God. The Baby already growing in Mary's womb would, one day, pay the price to ransom God's people from their sin and the death it earns for them. This message would be confirmed by the name which the Child would bear. The angel said, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name, Jesus, literally means "the Lord saves". And that's what this Baby would do when he became a man: save people from sin, death, and hell.

But, wait, there's more! The saving of God's people would not be accomplished by the Lord via remote control from heaven. This salvation would be accomplished and delivered in a very personal and intimate way. Matthew says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.' (Which means, God with us)."

Not only with the method of this baby's birth be unique – conceived in and born of a virgin – but the identity of this baby would be unique, as well. This baby would be God Himself. God would send no prophet, no angel, or no other extraordinary helper to win salvation for humanity. He would come himself. God takes on a human nature in Jesus Christ. The God Man would fulfill all that which was required of humanity in the Law of God – something He would not have to do if he were not human. The God Man would pay the ransom price to redeem God's people by offering His life on the cross – something he could not do if were not God. The God

Man would defeat death and hell by rising from death and ascending to heaven – something he would be unable to do if he were not God and man.

And Joseph believed. That is the really astounding part of the story. Yet we should not be surprised that it happened. For the same Holy Spirit Who brought forth a baby in the womb of a virgin also brought forth faith in the heart of Joseph. By virtue of the preaching of God's divine messenger, the angel; by virtue of the name of this baby – Jesus – which defines His work as saving all of humanity; and by virtue of Immanuel – God with us – Who carried out this mission, Joseph believed.

Even though we live two thousand years later, our experience is the same as Joseph and the people of his time. We are just as sinful (some would say even more sinful) as the people of that time. We are just as in need of God's salvation as the people of that time, too. And God, in His great love, is just as merciful to us as he was to Joseph and the Israelites of that time.

Things look bleak for us in our day and age. The effects and consequences of sin are prevalent in our world and in our own individual life experiences. We see war, terrorism, violence, and conflict throughout our world. We observe poverty, injustice, illness, and pain in our communities. We experience problems, suffering, aging, the death of friends, family, and loved ones, and deaths pursuit of us.

We are asked to believe that God has a solution to this problem. It must seem as strange and hard to believe for us as it did for Joseph: a 15-year-old virgin girl gives birth to a baby out of wedlock in a small backwoods town in Israel. That's the solution? It seems as odd and unbelievable to us as it did to Mary and as it did to Joseph. Yet it is as true and reliable for us as it was for Mary, as it was for Joseph, and as it is for all humanity. Why?

God does the same for us as he did for them. He still sends us messengers to confirm that this is His plan to save us. We may not see angels or dream of angels, but we still have those whom angels represent. The word, angel, simply means "messenger". God has sent many messengers – pastors, teachers, and others – who have declared to us the Word of God. They have told us that our rescue from past sin, our deliverance from present trouble, and our hope for future joy are possible only through the Baby born from Mary.

We still have the still name of that Baby given to Mary and Joseph as a reminder and a promise of God's deliverance. Jesus still means, "the Lord saves". The Lord will pay the debt which our sins have incurred for us and have doomed us to death and hell. The Lord will gain the righteousness and holiness which we need to stand before Him in the coming Judgment. The Lord will overcome death and reinstitute the life which He intended for humanity to have in the Garden of Eden.

We still have the same promise, given to Mary and to Joseph, which gives us confidence in God's deliverance: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)." Not only was God with us in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ to live holy in our place, to die as sacrifice for our sin, and to rise gloriously from the dead for us, but He is just as intimately and personally with us now to deliver His gifts to us.

In the preaching of the Word of God and the deliverance of forgiveness for sin, we hear the voice of Jesus, the Son of God, in the voice of the pastor and receive His instruction and His forgiveness. In the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine in Holy Communion, we consume the very body and blood of Jesus, the Son of God, for the forgiveness of our sins and for the strengthening of our unity with God and with one another.

God changed Joseph from being simply a just man or even a merciful man, to a man of faith who, not only believed what God said, but lived according to it. Joseph stopped rejecting the word of the Lord as it had come to him through Mary, regarding the coming of the Savior. He accepted God's plan by accepting Mary as his wife, despite all of the negative consequences that would result from that. And Joseph obeyed God and named Mary's Baby, Jesus.

God calls us to do the same thing. We are to be more than simply just or fair people. We are to be more than just merciful people, as well. We are to be people of faith, who not only believe what God says, but lived according to it. We are to stop rejecting the Word of the Lord, either by actively opposing it or apathetically ignoring it, no matter how hard it is for us to believe and no matter what negative consequences it might have for us. We are to accept God's way for saving us, no matter how fantastic it might seem or how different it is from the way we would do it. We are to obey God and walk by faith, not by sight.

As you celebrate Christmas once again this year and hear the familiar story of our Savior's birth in Luke and in John, consider how difficult it was for the characters in the stories to believe what God was doing and through whom He was doing it. God was saving the world, including you and me, from the consequences of sin, pain of death, and the punishment of hell through a tiny peasant Baby born to a teenage unwed mother in the stable of the remote village. Yet this Baby is both a real flesh and blood human being and the Almighty God who created the universe. Can you believe that? By the power of the Holy Spirit, you believe that; you receive the benefits of that birth, that life, that death, and that resurrection; and you live according to that, both here in time and in heaven for all eternity. Amen.