

I Believe in Love: Daring Right Relationship
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 1:16-25

You can learn a lot about a story if you just pay close attention to how it all begins.

Mark's Gospel starts off with a proclamation: "*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, the son of God*" – a claim of divinity that might have shocked and offended its original audience.

Luke is even more counter-cultural, beginning with the priest Zechariah getting an angelic vision about his elderly wife becoming pregnant – pregnant with a child who will become John the Baptist, all of it news that he most certainly does NOT believe.

Later, his young cousin Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel, and she becomes the first person to believe the Good News. As a woman, of course, she couldn't legally testify to what she had witnessed, but she rejoiced anyway.

Matthew begins in way that educated religious Jews of his day would have appreciated – with a genealogy designed to shock and impress his audience:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Aram.

Aram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.
Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.
Obed was the father of Jesse.
Jesse was the father of David the king.
David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.
Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.
Abijah was the father of Asaph.
Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.
Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.
Joram was the father of Uzziah.
Uzziah was the father of Jotham.
Jotham was the father of Ahaz.
Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.
Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.
Manasseh was the father of Amos.
Amos was the father of Josiah.
Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers.
This was at the time of the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel.
Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.
Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.
Abiud was the father of Eliakim.
Eliakim was the father of Azor.
Azor was the father of Zadok.
Zadok was the father of Achim.

Achim was the father of Eliud.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar was the father of Matthan.

Matthan was the father of Jacob... and Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

Phew! It reads a lot like those juicy plot summaries that recap a TV show. Here we have an honor roll of some of the most notorious people in the Hebrew Bible: Tamar was Perez' mother... but also his sister-in-law, then we've got Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute and spy; and Ruth, the foreigner; and David, who stole Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah in order to father King Solomon!

One you might not recognize in that lineup was King Ahaz of Judah. His refusal to ask God for help during a time of national crisis led the prophet Isaiah (in chapter 7) to speak this famous prophesy: *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,"* or *"God with us."*

Isaiah tells Ahaz not to trust in foreign allies and military power, but rather, to do as his ancestors had done and place his whole trust in the grace of God.

Isaiah reminds Ahaz that God loves us and is always at work in history, even when it is not clearly evident. God is always at work in us, mysteriously creating a new creation, laboring with us to deliver us from our suffering.

Like the young woman with the child growing inside her, God's miracles can come about in unseen ways and sometimes with an awful slowness.

And it usually ends with painful birth pangs.

Because the truth that is so very hard hear sometimes, is that God is with us. Emmanuel comes in the flesh, into the midst of our suffering, to rule the world with love.

Matthew is attempting to describe a mystic culmination of a much bigger story. The baby Jesus is not a traditional king, and his birth is not a heroic tale of conquest,

Rather, it's a love story.

I think we forget how bad it might have been for Joseph – the heartbreak and the humiliation, the way his friends looked at him, what his relatives may have said behind his back.

If you've ever had someone you loved break your heart, you know that feeling.

To Joseph's community, stoning Mary to death was not only his legal right, it was his obligation! In following the letter of the law he would set a public example and make Mary's death a deterrent to other immoral women.

Instead, Joseph breaks the law of his ancestors and offers Mary the gift of a second chance. Like the One who made him, Joseph offers amazing grace in the face of what everyone must assume is a flagrant sin. And so Joseph, this religious nobody, under no rabbinical advice – makes a decision that places heart over head, love over law, setting the tone for the entire message of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the rest of the Gospel.

Joseph didn't know that Christmas was coming; but he heard the call of Advent just the same. He heard its quiet, insistent longing for a world that follows different rules. A world that seeks to live in the light of great promises and is no longer trapped by familiar expectations.

He heard the invitation to live a life in which love dares to speak its name. And somehow, in that moment, he knew that was the only thing that mattered.

We know nothing about the role that Joseph played in the life of young Jesus, or if he lived long enough to teach him much about carpentry, or anything else for that matter – on that topic, the Gospel is silent.

But we know that the love that Jesus talked about, and stood for, and died for, was the same kind of rule-changing love that Joseph exhibited; a kind of non-abandoning, instinctive, sheltering, protecting, guiding, patient, quiet, healing love.

That's the love of Jesus. And the love of his father, Joseph. And the love of God.

For Joseph, it was the beginning of a new, distinctly countercultural vision. And the Christmas that lives in the heart remains profoundly countercultural, too. At its core, Christmas is about celebrating the power of our capacity to love and be loved.

In the end, LOVE is the most important thing. In these final days before Christmas, may you hear the quiet hymn that is God's great love song to you, and to us all. And may it strengthen you to follow love's call with joy and purpose, letting go of everything else.

Let every heart prepare him room. Amen.