

“Just Can’t Say All That Needs Saying”

A sermon based on Matthew 1:18-25
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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We are very close to the Nativity now. Just 2 more days. As we approach that blessed day, when we celebrate God’s best gift to the world, we feel many things. Joy. Peace. Love. Hope renewed. Delight. Maybe even surprise. Wonder.

But how about speechlessness? I suggest to you that speechlessness is a very appropriate sensation at Christmas. A complete loss of words. A sense both of needing to say so much, and yet knowing fully that none of our words will ever adequately explain our faith, nor our gratitude for this great gift God has given us.

Before the great mysteries of our faith, and there is none greater than God-with-us, our language, our ability to express what it is we believe, is stretched to the breaking point. The only thing that can help us approach the mysteries is art.

This is one reason there is so much excellent music for the celebration of the Nativity. Poetry, song, sculpture and painting are about the best ways we can express our sense of the mysterious.

But even art cannot say all that needs to be said about Jesus. It is both because we always know more than we can say, and because Jesus is larger than life. Jesus shatters all of the categories of conventional sacred speech.

And so, when we read the Gospels, especially Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts of the Nativity, we sense an odd tension in their telling of the story. On one hand Matthew tells us that Jesus is the “Son of David,” in the line of the old kings, and the fulfillment of all the promises made to King David. On the other hand, Jesus is also “from the Holy Spirit,” and far more than a mere descendant of Israelite royalty. He is both son of David and Son of God.

Far from being an expression of confusion, this tension reflects the awareness that many things must be said about Jesus. And it reflects the fact that our language simply is stretched to the breaking point when we try to say all that needs to be said.

If we allow ourselves, during these days of being busy to the point of exhaustion, to be still long enough to contemplate the wonder of the Incarnation, we will come to realize that speechlessness is a most appropriate response to the wonder and the mystery of God-with-us. We just cannot say all that needs to be said.

II

Joseph's presence in the Gospels can be read to embody this speechlessness. After all, Joseph doesn't have much to say in any of the Gospels. Luke has Mary proclaim her Magnificat. Matthew only tells us what happened to Joseph and what he did. He doesn't tell us that Joseph said anything.

One pastor tells a story about a Christmas Pageant performed one year at his church. The sanctuary was decorated. The cast was set. They had been rehearsing for weeks.

Just before the program was to begin, the pastor took a call from the mother of the boy who was chosen to play the part of Joseph. He was sick. He would be unable to take part in the pageant.

There wasn't much panic. There wasn't much time to panic. So what they decided to do was just drop Joseph's part from the pageant. The pageant went on without him. And to the pastor's great surprise, no one seemed to notice!

Joseph's part in the Gospels is far from insignificant, however. His faithfulness and obedience are as important as that of Mary. But Matthew has an agenda in his telling of the story of Jesus, and Joseph's presence, while an integral part of the story, is secondary to 2 other things Matthew wants us to know about Jesus. Those two things are the conception of Jesus, and the names that are given to this unique baby. Matthew uses both of these things to tell us that this child is special. They tell us who Jesus is and what he will do.

Matthew chooses to tell us about the conception of Jesus from the perspective of Joseph. It is clear from what Matthew tells us that Joseph is a righteous man. Time after time, Joseph does what the angel tells him to do. After he learns that Mary is pregnant, and because he knows that he is not the father,

he makes up his mind to annul the engagement. According to custom and law, this was the proper thing to do. We get a sense of his righteousness when Matthew tells us that Joseph made up his mind to do it quietly. He was not bound to do that. He could have broken the engagement very publicly. But he did not want to disgrace Mary. And so he resolved to end things honorably and quietly.

It was just after he made that decision, that the angel visited him and said, "Don't be afraid to marry Mary," and explained why he should do this. And Joseph obeyed. He went against everything his upbringing, his culture, and his religion had taught him to do. He obeyed the angel. He took Mary as his wife. He gave Jesus the name he was told to give.

Later, after the birth, Joseph obeyed again when the angel warned them to flee to Egypt. Of course, he obeyed when the call came to return to Palestine. And he obeyed when the angel told him that he should settle in the region around Galilee. Joseph was indeed a faithful and righteous man.

In his telling of the Gospel story, Matthew is trying to tell us two very clear things about the way in which Jesus was conceived. First, it was the work of God. Joseph had nothing to do with it. That makes Jesus' conception something altogether new. Jesus is not simply one more name like all those who preceded him.

The second thing Matthew wants us to understand is that Mary's conception is that foreseen in Isaiah 7. From the beginning, there were likely rumors that Mary was an adulteress and that Jesus was illegitimate. Matthew dismisses those rumors out of hand. Mary's unique conception is not disreputable or embarrassing. It is the work of God.

But even more than this, Mary's conception signals the beginning of the fulfillment of God's saving purposes. This fresh, new act of God is the beginning of a new age, long expected and hoped for, but so unusual that it could hardly have been anticipated. The sign given to Ahaz is finally revealed, but in a way that neither Ahaz nor Isaiah could have dreamed. God is doing here a thing that has never been done before.

III

This habit God has of doing new things is such good news for us. In Isaiah 43, the prophet proclaims, *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”* In other words, our lives do not have to be perfect for God to come among us.

During these beautiful Advent and Christmas days, many of us can be driven to despair. All of the Christmas cards have not been sent out. We have not found just the right gift for some. Our homes may not be immaculate nor perfectly appointed. Our families may be far away, and our relationships may not be near what we would like. And the sense that all should be just so, our desire that for just this brief time of the year we would like all things to be well, clashes with the reality that all is not just so.

The good news is that God is not intimidated by our imperfect lives. God loves us so much that God will make a way in the desert. God will make streams flow in arid deserts, for us.

Think about the Nativity. Could the coming of God-with-us, of Immanuel, have been any more difficult and dangerous than it was? When God decided it was time for Jesus to be born, God decided that the birth would happen, not in a free nation, safe and well ordered, but in an occupied country, filled with violence. And the woman chosen to bring Jesus into the world, she was barely a woman, a teenager. Far from being born in a palace, as we might expect the descendant of kings to be, Jesus was born in poverty. Let us not even talk about the healthcare then. And where was the family of Mary or Joseph? It seems they are all alone, first on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and then in the stable of the inn, they were alone.

Do you see? How could the coming of Christ among us been more difficult, more risky, more miraculous? Given those circumstances, do you really think God might be put off by our imperfections, or the difficult nature of our families?

God does not require perfection to come among us. Instead we are told over and over that light breaks out in the darkness. Life arises from the very

midst of death. And love overcomes hate and fear and isolation. Perfection is not needed.

All that is needed is acceptance of God's invitation, as Mary accepted the invitation of Gabriel. All that is needed is trust, like Joseph, who trusted the invitation of the angel, and did right by Mary.

When we are open to God's grace, Christ comes among us, even into the poverty of our natures, even into our humble, imperfect circumstances. And rejoicing and wonder fills us with delight. That does indeed sound like good news to me.

IV

Jesus is no mere figure of the past, who haunts the dusty pages of scripture. His life is not contained in the span of three decades. He is not localized solely in places like Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee or Judea. Jesus was before all things, and he will be after all has passed away. He embodied everything we need to know about God. And he remains with us still, going before the Church in its mission, energizing its teaching, preaching and service, and pioneering its efforts to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus is God-with-us, forever and ever. And mere words are just not up to the task of saying all that needs to be said about that reality. Others ways to express that reality are needed, too, like art, music, and the sacraments. For all of the ways that God chooses to speak to us, and come among us, Thanks be to God. Amen.