

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
St. Matthew 1:18-25: "Joseph's Hope Is Our Hope."
December 23/24, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Heavenly Father, You gave us Your Son. Give us Your Holy Spirit's light and grace to believe. O give us grace to believe and to receive the blessedness of grace in Christ. Praise to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, forevermore! Amen. (Prayer for Christmas Eve, Laache's *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 64)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "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. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." / 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"). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called His name Jesus. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, our Hope, our heart's Delight (ELH #94, v. 1), dear fellow redeemed:

Before there were Christmas elves and bell ringers outside grocery stores, before there were letters addressed to the North Pole and a reindeer named Rudolph, before there was a man dressed in red and white whose belly shook like a bowl full of jelly, before lights were hung on houses and in trees, before there were Christmas trees and Christmas stockings, before a faithful pastor named St. Nicholas lived and worked in the third and fourth centuries – before all these things, there was Christmas, the birth of the Christ-Child, God come in the flesh.

But what was there before that? There was hope. There was hope that the woman's Seed would crush Satan's head (Gen. 3:15). There was hope that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's Offspring (Gen. 22:18). There was hope that a living Redeemer would raise His people from the dead (Job. 19:25-27). There was hope that a Prophet like Moses would arise (Deu. 18:15). There was hope that a Prince of Peace would come (Is. 9:6). There was hope that a righteous Branch would grow from the line of Jesse (Is. 11:1) and David (Jer. 23:5-6) to rule in justice forever. There was hope.

I

But along with hope there was doubt. Doubt always accompanies hope; the devil and the flesh make sure of it. Doubt is quiet but persistent: Are you *sure*? What if this is all made up? What if there is no God? What if all the things you thought were fact are nothing but a fairy tale? Imagine living before the birth of Christ. You would have no idea when God's promises would become reality. There was no countdown clock. The periods "B. C." and "A. D." were instituted long after Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. At the time of Adam or Noah or Abraham or David, you would not know if the coming of the Messiah was one year away, 1000 years away... or perhaps not at all.

All you had to go on was the Word. That doesn't always seem like much. It does not satisfy the thirst for proof. Isn't that the rallying cry in our day against everything recorded in the Bible? "Prove it!" But whether it passes any sort of objective or scientific test is not as important today as whether it passes the test of the heart. The main thing is how a person feels about what the Bible says. So then what is true for one, may not be true for another.

What does this lead to? It results in an unsure Word, a changing Word, one that is adjusted to fit the person instead of the other way around. A wavering Word means a wavering hope. Hope must stand on something solid, or it cannot stand at all. Without the promises given in the Bible, there would be no cause for anyone to be hopeful about anything in this life. If there is no forgiveness, we remain in our sins. If there is no life, we are on our way to a bitter death. The Apostle Paul wrote that as long as any are separated from Christ, they are without "*hope and without God in the world*" (Eph. 2:12).

Joseph was not without hope. He was an Israelite and a descendant of King David. He was taught the Old Testament Scriptures as all Jewish children were, and he worshipped in his local synagogue. It is evident that he believed what he had been taught, since in today's text he is referred to as "*a just man*."

This "*just man*" became acquainted with a young woman named Mary. He asked if she would be his wife, and she agreed. It was a love story unlike many we see in sitcoms and movies today. Joseph and Mary did not hop in bed together after getting to know each other a bit. Even after they were engaged, they did not engage in sexual activity, because they were not married. They knew the meaning of the Sixth Commandment. They knew that to act otherwise was to go against God's will.

Joseph thanked God for blessing him with a pious woman. He looked forward with joy to his wedding day as any godly man would. But then the horrible discovery: Mary was pregnant! How could she! How could he have not seen her for what she was? Was he so gullible, so ignorant? His heart broken, Joseph made plans to end their engagement. He could have made a public example of her, but instead resolved to end things quietly. He would leave the justice to God.

But before he had done this, "*an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*." The angel told him to take Mary as his wife, for her child was not from man but from God. Her child in fact *was* God, who would "*save His people from their sins*." Joseph woke up with a much different mindset

than before. Before, he could hardly hope to be happy again. Now, there were two reasons for happiness: 1) Mary had not betrayed him after all, and 2) the Savior had come!

Joseph had hope, but that doesn't mean he was without doubt. If you were in his shoes, wouldn't you wonder if you might be the greatest fool in history? What if the angel in his dream was just a figment of his imagination? Then he would be about to marry someone who was both immoral and untruthful. Had his mind cooked up this hopeful dream as a way to cope with the betrayal of the woman he loved?

II

But there was something more to Joseph's hope than the message of the angel. The evangelist Matthew helps us see this by quoting the words of the prophet: "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name 'Immanuel.'*" Joseph knew this prophecy. It was written down by Isaiah over 700 years before this. It states clearly that an "Immanuel" would come, a "God with us," who would be born of a virgin. God had chosen lowly Mary, Joseph's betrothed, to bear the Savior of the world.

This prophecy in Isaiah is a major sticking point for those who deny the virgin birth today. They try to argue that the word for "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 can also be translated as "young woman." They say that Isaiah must have been talking about some young woman who had a baby at that time. According to these skeptics, not only is a virgin birth impossible, but it would have been impossible for Isaiah to predict something so clearly hundreds of years before it happened. They say that if there was a Mary living in Nazareth some 2000 years ago, she conceived a child in the natural way, either with Joseph or some other man.

But if they don't believe what the Bible says, why do they waste their time telling us so? If, as they say, the Bible is a collection of man-made fables, why do they argue about the details? It is because they don't want you to believe it either. If they can get you to deny the virgin birth, it is just a small step beyond to deny everything the Bible says about Jesus. The Bible claims that Jesus is God from eternity, but He cannot be that if He was conceived naturally.

And what do these pagans gain by their assault on God's Word and God's people? With the Bible out of the way, they might be able to quiet their conscience to some extent. They might feel more comfortable in their sin. But they haven't gained any hope. If there is no God, if God did not become man and suffer and die for sinners and rise again, then life has no real purpose, it has no goal. Then a person is left with empty accomplishments, meaningless possessions, and the guilt of a life poorly lived. But if the Lord has come, and if He came to rescue sinners from their miserable condition, then there is purpose for this life, then there is an end goal. Then there is hope.

We have hope. Our hope is not based on anything in us, on our own thinking and doing. Like Joseph, our hope is based on what God says, what He promises. God knows how we struggle to hang on to this hope. He knows how the devil and our own flesh tempt us to doubt. This is why He gives us Means to strengthen us. He gives pastors to preach His Word and administer His Sacraments. And He gives fellow Christians to encourage us along the way.

In these things that are seen, God gives us hope in what is unseen (Rom. 8:24-25). He gives us the sure and confident hope of life in heaven whenever our lives in this world come to an end. Eternal life is ours because Jesus saved us from the death and hell we deserved. Sin separated us from God, but Jesus reconciled us again by His innocent suffering and death. It is as the angel told Joseph, *"He will save His people from their sins."* This is why He was to be called Jesus, a name which means, *"The LORD saves."*

Jesus came to save you, to be your Immanuel. He came to give you hope of a future much brighter and a life far greater than this one. It is a hope that comes only by God's grace and only through the power of His Word. It is through this Word that you, and Joseph and Mary, and all the faithful have been *"born again to a living hope"* (1Pe. 1:3). The incarnate Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, who died and rose again for you and all sinners—He is the reason for the season, and the *"reason for the hope that is in you"* (3:15).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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