

“Spend Less” Matthew 1:18-25

“The story of Jesus’ birth (in Matthew’s gospel) is told in a beautiful and simple style,” writes one author. (Source: Myron S. Augsburg) But it’s not the “familiar story” you and I are accustomed to hearing around this time of the year. For “well-known” we need to go to Luke’s narrative of the Christmas story. Even Charles Shultz and his holiday tradition of a “Charlie Brown Christmas”™ knows this much. But Matthew’s story is still important and some say was actually Luke’s starting point when Luke retells the story, the “greatest story ever told.” And if, as Allyson told us last Sunday, Matthew made the mistake of most up and coming writers of not giving a great “hook” to draw readers into his book, he continues this “error” in a matter-of-fact way he writes for the remainder of chapter 1 – following that dreaded genealogy. “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way,” writes Matthew. (Matt 1:18a) Now some might think for a moment that Matthew is preparing to talk about the “birds and the bees” when he tries to answer the “way” in which Jesus birth “took place” or that the miraculous divine birth will be clearly explained, but Matthew has none of this. Matthew avoids all the “bells and whistles” (so to speak) when he answers his only question and instead tells the story of Jesus’ birth in just a handful of verses with the main difference with Luke is that Joseph and not Mary becomes the prominent parent. But even with this minor detail, it is still the story of a young, ordinary couple, from a nowhere place, entering into a relationship that was common for the period – notwithstanding the “extraordinary” conception being mentioned as just one detail among many.

So yes, our lesson this morning is first and foremost a story of a couple beginning their lives together - an arrangement between two families that we can rightly assume had been going on for some time and something, that at first, seems somewhat confusing, to our modern-day ears. For example, what you may or may not know is that there were “three stages” in any middle-eastern, first-century marriage that Mary and Joseph had entered into. There was first the **engagement** that was typically arranged by parents or a professional matchmaker when the couple was only children. Sometimes it was an arrangement for financial reasons, other times to combine family property. Most of time the future couple had never, and would never meet one another until the **betrothal** or the ratification of the engagement by the family and religious leaders. If both families (including the couple) agreed with the betrothal contract things were absolutely binding and lasted for a period of one year. What may sound odd to us at this point is that during this year long betrothal (that we consider the engagement today) the couple were actually “known” as husband and wife less the fact they were not yet living together and had therefore had not consummated the

marriage. So as a married couple (just not living together) the only way to end the relationship was to divorce so this is why there may be confusion when Joseph speaks of “dismissing”(Mary) quietly. This is no “leaving someone at the altar” during the engagement scenario that Joseph is speaking about, but about ending a marriage even though the third and final stage (**marriage proper**) had not officially occurred. With Mary and Joseph not living together or becoming “known” to one another (if you know what I mean) the fact that Mary was “with child” tells readers (and Joseph) that Mary had done something that was not just deserving of divorce but death because Joseph knew he was definitely not the father. No investigation was needed, no trial would occur because the evidence of a bulging belly and the words of betrothed man claiming not to be the father was all that was needed. The Law allowed, even encouraged divorce in such matters, but “grace” and not “law” seems to be far more evident for Matthew’s Joseph’s life, especially when Matthew was a “righteous” man (one who was “right” with God) who did not want Mary to endure “public disgrace.” Remember, we are dealing with a story from first century Palestine of a woman who had done a “terrible” thing that not only disgraced herself and left a permanent scar upon her life with little hope of her ever finding someone to take care of her or her baby but also ruined and entire family’s reputation and we haven’t mentioned the indelible mark upon this innocent baby because of the careless act of his/her parents. We are therefore left wondering about the fitness of Joseph to even be a father, if he was that gullible to believe his teenage wife that she had been with no one, yet she was pregnant. If such was the case, “I have some swamp land in Florida I would like to sell you Joseph.” But if not gullible then what? Afraid? It seems he was afraid because of the words spoken to him by the angel, which just happens to be the same words to Mary (according to Luke) or to the shepherds (also according to Luke). We imagine Joseph to be angry (because who of us who would not be angry when we feel betrayed by someone we love) but fear is a far deeper emotion. So when the angel says to Joseph, “Do not be afraid,” we take notice. But what was Joseph actually afraid of? What did Joseph have to fear? He was not the one having a baby. Was he “afraid” of what people would say if they knew the “whole” story? Was he fearful of being an “adoptive” parent (I know I was) but even more the adoptive parent of the “Son of God”? Yes and yes and yes but may I suggest even one more reason for Joseph’s fear that the angel answers which was telling Joseph and all the those listening the answer to the question we all were wanting to ask but afraid to ask... “So who is the Father?” Now remember Maury Povich and Jerry Springer are still a long way off from being born and able to reveal the results of the paternity test. So instead it is the angel who gives the answer saying that God, the Holy Spirit, is the Father of this baby soon to be born. It may sound brand new to us but stories of such births

(especially among Matthew's Greek readers) would be well-known – about gods and mortals having a child together. But this was no Zeus-like story. Instead it was a story told long before the Greeks even developed their mythology. This was an account that Joseph, Mary and other good Jews would have known and heard as children - as far back as the prophet Isaiah when he wrote (and which Matthew reminds us) that one day, God would close and save us. It may sound complicated as well as a lifetime ago, at least for Isaiah, but was a simple story.

And this apparently, is what billions of people (Christ followers and sentimentalists alike) love about the Christmas Story – at its core is a simple story with a simple message, at least according to Matthew. A story about a young couple who are eagerly awaiting the birth of their first born with even one less thing to concern themselves with because God had named their baby for them. No need to argue about if the baby would share a name with Joseph's grandfather or Mary's favourite uncle. No need to even argue amongst themselves or draw from a hat because God had named their baby for them. And even the name would be simple - a popular name of the period where it would not be uncommon to have 3 or 4 of "these" in a grade 4 classroom or 4 or more in a Sunday School class. The name given to Mary and Joseph was the name "Jesus" and not because it had a nice ring to it, but because it literally meant something. And please understand although we see Isaiah prophesying about a completely different name its not Isaiah was wrong or that he was giving Jesus' second name but that the name Emmanuel also literally meant something so as not to complicate things.

So what happened, that we have complicated the story so, or made Christmas into something it was never intended to be? If God had wanted Christmas to become what many have turned Christmas into, I would suggest God would have had Matthew write a very different narrative. God, for example, would have been birthed to a far better known family, for one thing - a wealthier family with a more prominent existence. No Value Village™ shopping family here. And let's not forget Jesus' place of birth (a stable) or the town (Bethlehem) where Jesus would begin his life. Matthew makes sure not to include too much Advent wonder (only 7 verses and no choirs of angels, for example) or Christmas hoopla because Jesus birth is only one verse in length. Certainly this would be a very brief and not so interesting Christmas Pageant if it were only from Matthew's perspective. So why does Matthew condense the story so? Does the story matter so little to him? I believe the story is critical to Matthew – it's just that we sometimes we forget the lesson Matthew wants to leave us with. Maybe Matthew is trying to tell us to first not over-complicate the Christmas message. Is not the story of Jesus impending birth the simple story of Emmanuel (God coming close) to save us (which just happens to be what the name Jesus means.

According to Matthew is not Christmas more about God's presence than the presents we give to one another? So as we ponder again this simple family and God's simple message it should, I believe, inspire us to live simpler lives.

That's why this Christmas, we are inviting you to "conspire" with us to make "Christmas meaningful again." Far too often (maybe even as recent as this past Christmas) we have "bought" into the lie that we need to make Christmas complicated, busy and expensive. In other words the more we spend the better our Christmas will be and the happier those we are buying for will be. So we spend, and then we spend some more and then we spend even more and in doing so we simply become part of the statistics of the 1% who will spend a trillion dollars this Christmas. But we are not even talking about spending on things that will make a difference but spending on things that do not matter – at least in the big picture. What I mean by this is simply buying "things" so we can cross someone off the list or buying "things" so someone else will have the most up to date model. As much as we try to justify our spending ("We are spending on those we love and isn't that a good thing?") we have, I suggest to you, complicated Christmas and taking the "meaning" out of the season.

So this Christmas let's conspire to spend less. It may be too late for some of you but for most of us it's not yet to late. Even if its about agreeing as a family to cut back on the amount we spend or buying one less present, or consider making something rather than buying something we can make Christmas meaningful again. I mean, if God is willing to give Himself to us, in a stable, to lowly parents, and born in a nowhere town, then live as a refugee and finally give himself (his very self) for us, then how much more should that impact the way we live, not only for the next 16 days but how we live the day after Christmas or the next year or for the rest of our lives which is to simply, following the example of a simple story.