

December 24, 2017 Christmas Matthew 1:18-25

To gather the facts of the birth of Jesus one has to play the game of Biblical, hop, skip and jump. Luke chapter 1 tells us the story of Mary, her discovery that God the Almighty has chosen her to be the mother of Jesus. She becomes pregnant by means of the blessing of the Spirit of God. She understands that this could wreck her plans for a “normal” life as the wife of Joseph. But she submits to God’s holy will.

Jumping to Matthew 1 we discover that Joseph reacts to Mary’s being with child. His first decision is that he is not going to go through with the wedding. There is an irony here that we should understand. Joseph is a religious man, a man of faith. He makes the assumption that Mary must have another man in her life. He has no desire to disgrace her. But he is not about to become her husband.

How does all of this resolve.... because it does and it did. Mary accepts her lot as the direct result of an encounter with God. His messenger is an angel. Joseph becomes Mary’s husband, caring for her and this firstborn son, in fact naming HIM as the direct result of an encounter with God. God’s messenger is an angel. Matthew and Luke, and Jewish society in general take angels very seriously, as the messengers of the one true God.

At the heart of the Christmas story is this most basic of facts. Mary and Joseph are visited by the messenger of God. The result is a submission to God’s will that would otherwise not have occurred. They become a family. The Christ child is born to them in Bethlehem according to the prophecies. And with a few notable exceptions, they go for a time unnoticed to the world in general. Yes they are visited by shepherds, and the Magi from the east. Thus they learn of the star, and angel choruses. And the secret of Christmas then, as in our day is one simple fact...this history only makes sense provided the reader, the student, the disciple takes God seriously.

The angel that appeared to Joseph appealed to his faith embracing nature. “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give HIM the name Jesus, because HE will save HIS people from their sins.” Joseph does as he has been told. The marriage is not consummated until after their first son is born. Joseph names HIM Jesus. Christmas, Jesus birth is thus defined. It is about the redemption of mankind. Joseph and Mary are submissive servants of the Lord God Almighty.

Tonight, is a holy night. Tomorrow is a holy day. This season with all of its traditions, recognizes the singular reality, God wills to redeem us from our sin. Jesus is the means of that redemption.

All of our familiar and family traditions are but the wrapping paper that covers this most tremendous gift. And like all wrapping paper, our traditions, if we value them too highly can hide the precious secret which is the gift itself. Only we can remove the wrapping and

behold the holy mystery of God loving us so much that HE would provide HIS Son to suffer and die for us, to save us. It is the morning of the 24th. And we come to the moment, this night, tomorrow morning with a tremendous sense of expectation.... If yes the word is, if.... we believe.

This is faith's finest hour. To celebrate Christmas in its purest sense...we need to be believers. Because Christmas is all about the Lord our God. He chose Mary. Through her, God gave us HIS Son, Jesus. God chose Joseph. Through Joseph, God gave Jesus and Mary a man who would protect them, provide for them, lead them and lead them to the right places at the right moments. The prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled by Caesar's great proclamation of the 1st census taken throughout the Roman Empire. That human plan to tax the Empire more efficiently brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in the fruit growing region where the baby Jesus was born.

It was on the hills outside Bethlehem, today covered with homes and businesses alike that shepherds were terrified by an angel choir celebrating the moment, the birth of the King of all creation. It was on the hills of Bethlehem the shepherds made the decision to go into town and see this "thing that had happened." And they found Mary and Joseph at the stable attached to the Inn, and the baby lying in a manger. And they rejoiced, and returned to their work as shepherds with a lightness of heart and mind and soul they had not known. Why? Because the words of the angel of God had been shown to them to be true. God's word is real!

And it was in Bethlehem, in the fruit growing region, a few miles south of Jerusalem, that the Magi from the east would find the family living in a house. Having followed the star that they were certain was the sign a King had been born, they had spent a fortune mounting this expedition. They had attended the conference with Herod. They had been directed to Bethlehem. That star appeared confirming they were on the right road. And seeing Mary and her infant, they brought out their gifts, and on their knees, in prayer, they presented Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh. The king who is God, who will experience redeeming death on a Roman cross, and by faith, will save so many from their sins.

Whatever else happens as part of tomorrow's day, there will be faith in the God who saves...or there will be nothing of eternal value. That is what the gospels tell us. That is what the writers Matthew and Luke communicate concerning the birth of Jesus. This has to do with God or it means nothing. God gave Jesus to us as the ultimate gift or we receive nothing. God required faith on Mary's part. God required faith on Joseph's part. And God requires faith on our part as well.... If our eyes are to see and behold the salvation of God.

Christmas is a remarkable moment. The Lord God the Almighty touches you. You feel the excitement. You anticipate. You keep family traditions and customs in your homes behind closed doors. Or with neighbours and friends behind their doors. Because God has touched you just as HE touched Mary and Joseph, and the wise men, and the shepherds. And here is the secret. You are merry....because God has given you reason and faith to celebrate Christmas.

Let us pray;

Holy God, thank you for this holy day and night. Thank you for the birth of Jesus. Thank you for the lessons HE would teach us and our world...the blessings of kindness and love and peace and joy. Thank you for Jesus lessons about our need to think of and provide for those who do not have what we can share. Thank you for the grace gift of faith that perceives your real presence and desires to worship you. For redemption's perfect lamb. Thank you God. Make use of us that others might taste the joy and know the peace. Amen