

December 15, 2019 The Facts Matthew 1:18-25

Last week I shared with you the passage from Luke's Gospel chapter 1. In it we got the detailed account of just how it came to pass that Mary learned of her being chosen to be the mother of Jesus. It involved a visit to her in Nazareth by an angel of God. We even learned the name of that angel...Gabriel. It is clear that Luke's account contains the kind of detail he only could have gotten from one source...Mary herself. And being a doctor, it is also clear that if he did not get the information first hand from Mary, his research and his connections as a physician led him to women who did know Mary's story first hand and in detail. Luke tells Theophilus, for whom he wrote the document, that he studied the available information carefully. He checked sources. In a time when the current calendar was not in use he tried as often as he could to tie details down to give a responsible sense of the time, and to locate the details in space. The angel visited Mary in Nazareth during the sixth month of the pregnancy of her relative and friend, a senior woman, named Elizabeth. Luke's account gives the details.

Matthew's account gives us the facts. Like: it is possible to figure out Jesus family tree. The genealogy is important. It establishes another fact. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, HE must be of the line of David, and a son of the line of Abraham. When it comes to telling us the story of Jesus birth, Matthew reads like a line out of the old tv series Dragnet.

Matthew gives us the facts and nothing but the facts. And it is important to note that Matthew's facts and Luke's details overlap. In this way they establish, we are not dealing with a story concocted much later to justify the claims of the Church. These facts in Matthew and those details in Luke predate the time when the Church had anything like power, and when it was not a respected institution. It was an underground, illegal, and persecuted cause. People were losing their lives because they believed those facts to be sound, and those details to be dependable testimony.

So what are the facts about Christmas? They are the knowable, provable, facts concerning Jesus. If there is a birth story, there must have been parents. Matthew tells us as the first book in the New Testament collection, that Jesus mother was Mary, that she was pledged to be married to Joseph. Jewish culture. The marriage would have been arranged through a local matchmaker. And yes, it was an arranged marriage. And there has never been a hint of Mary's objecting to the arrangement that was made. If life were always a smooth road they would have been married according to the arrangements. Further if Matthew's account was composed to justify the Church there would have been no hint of scandal, no hint of the arrangement between Mary's family and Joseph's family, coming undone.

Matthew tells us the facts. And one of those facts is explosive. Before Mary and Joseph came together and married,

the news broke that Mary was pregnant. Joseph is not the father. And here is one of those interesting overlappings of Matthew's facts and Luke's details. Matthew tells us in the fewest words possible that Mary's pregnancy is an act of God. The Holy Spirit is the causative agent. Luke tells us how Mary came by this insight: the details of the visit of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel is the messenger. He tells her the son she will bear will be called the Son of the Most High. God who has chosen her for this." And that Matthew tells us this, is when (we would say) the poop hit the fan. Joseph is a very religious man. He likes Mary, but not that much. Joseph decides to break off relations with Mary and to not proceed with the marriage. Because Joseph likes her, perhaps even loved her, he decided to do this quietly. No public announcement. He had no desire to hurt her...disgrace involves pain. In Israel in that time it could have cost Mary her life.

So Joseph considered what he would do and what he would not do. And the fact is it became Joseph's turn to be visited by an angel of God. And because this document (as is the case of all 4 Gospels) is written after the resurrection of Jesus 33 years later, and Joseph has disappeared from the picture, we presume he has died as no other information is provided, we are not told the name of the angel who visited Joseph in a dream. Joseph did his duty as a good father, but he apparently never shared his story with anyone. His visitor came in the form of a dream. He did not ask questions. He was so moved by the experience, when he woke up, that Joseph

married Mary. He cared for her as a loyal and dutiful husband does. He had other children with her, including the disciple of Jesus named James which I take to be a testimony that there was love as well as duty in this arranged marriage. But here is a fact Mary could provide...Joseph cared for her as a pregnant wife. They did not consummate their marriage until after Jesus was born.

And another fact. As both Mary and Joseph were charged by their respective visitors who were messengers of God, the name of Jesus was given to their firstborn son. And because this is a Jewish history, being told to us by a disciple of Jesus who set out to tell a Jewish story, Joseph is the one who publicly takes the lead on this matter of naming the first son born to Mary. There is a ceremony in the Jewish faith in which newborns are dedicated to God. Jesus was dedicated. And the tradition is that that ceremony is the time when the name is announced by the father. Joseph made sure it was done right, done according to the revealed will of the Most High God. And that Jewish ceremony of dedication of infants evolved into our ceremony of baptizing infants. And those Protestant denominations that do not practice infant baptism continue to call it a ceremony of dedication.

When I was serving as minister to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in New Liskeard in Northeastern Ontario, the local Baptist minister, a dear friend, the late Rev. Paul Timpany asked me if I would consider "dedicating" their infant

adopted son. I replied that I would be honoured. So, a date was arranged on which I would preach at an evening service at the Baptist Church, and I would dedicate their son. Most of the Clergy from our ministerial and their spouses were present and there was a reception at the Timpany home in the neighbouring town of Haileybury. Ministers cannot resist teasing other ministers and Paul and Isobel and Morley and Barbara were really close friends. During the reception I invited Isobel and Paul into their kitchen. I said, "I have a confession to make. I baptized your son." Isobel rose to the bait and replied, "It couldn't be, there was no water." To which I replied, "Before I blessed him, I licked my thumb." Laughter and hugs followed.

Matthew had an agenda. He wanted his Jewish friends and the Jewish community of which he had been a part to know this Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the prophets. So he quotes from Isaiah 7:14. This fact is God's provided sign: "The virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel," (which means God With US). And Jesus is the Greek form the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "The Lord Saves." Yeshua Hamasheik in Hebrew...Fact!

Let us pray;

Lord we give thanks for the facts of Jesus birth. We thank you that we are privileged to enjoy this marvelous season of the year, with its music, with its symbols, with its colours, its traditions, and according to the Scriptures. Most of all we thank you for this name which is above every other name.

Thank you for Jesus and all the blessing we have received in  
and through HIS PRESENCE in our lives. Amen