

Title: Did you hear what I heard?

Scripture: Matthew 1.18-25

Theme: Joseph and Mary journeyed away from themselves and into a spiritual exile in obedience to God's call. We are called to do the same.

Advent readings: Isaiah 7.14 and Matthew 1.18-25

The whole purpose and plan of God and the hope of Israel was that God would fulfill his promise and return to set the world right. This word from the Prophet Isaiah found its full meaning in the birth of Jesus. Emmanuel- God with us, was to mean so much more than any of us could imagine.

Introduction:

Our scripture reading today takes us to a place where archeologists discovered some very interesting things in 2009. Most never really thought that Nazareth was a boom town with a huge population. But what they discovered during the dig was that it wasn't even a bustling suburb. Instead, what they found was one very small house foundation and then a few more, all from right around the time of Jesus that showed instead a tiny hamlet of about 70 homes and just under 500 inhabitants.

Interestingly enough, Nazareth was not much different than many of the towns we find along the back roads of Vermont. Places like Belvedere (300), Cabot (247), Athens (326), Goshen (215) and Saxtons River (480). Places, where in the grand scheme of things nothing of real significance happens. That is unless you live there. Then everything is big news and everyone knows about it. Anyone who grew up in one of these small places, or others like it understands that.

Its here we find ourselves. Nestled in the hill country roughly halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee is the tiny village North-northwest of Jerusalem called Nazareth. Much has changed in 2000 years, but one thing that remains constant that people flock to, is the village water source. A well in town that they call the Virgins well. It has been the source of water for thousands of years. It is here most likely that Mary would have journeyed with her mother to gather water for the day. It is a good bet that Jesus too most likely would have accompanied her there as a little child. I wonder how much impact that had on him later in life when he saw another ostracized woman like his mother at a well in Samaria. His parents set the example for him regarding how to be obedient to God no matter the cost. We'll see that example today. However, the scriptures don't say just when the visit to Mary happened but a good guess would be sometime in the summer. Mary would have been out and about in her little town doing what young ladies do. Gathering water, planting seeds, playing with friends. For Mary it most likely included watching for her betrothed to return home.

One day in particular stood out above the rest. The Bible doesn't say where she was or what she was doing, but we do know that she had a visitor. I can only imagine that she was alone at the time, maybe taking that one mile walk toward where the main source of water for the town came from. Matthew simply tells us that she was pledged to be married. Now what that meant was that she was engaged and the waiting period of one year was still in effect. Now in her day, an engagement was as valid as being married. You couldn't break it off without a certificate of divorce. Her betrothed, Joseph was a young man and a builder / carpenter. That meant more than likely he would have traveled to a place just to the west called Sepphoris to find the work necessary to make a living.

Given all that, it makes this all the more extraordinary what these two young people chose to do with what they were told. I will say to you, its not quite as sterile and quaint as we think.

So I have three take away's for us today to look at. I pray that you will find during the week time to reflect on how they apply to you, your situation and family. The first takeaway being:

1. Do you hear what I hear? It's God's child

We find in Matthew's telling of the Gospel a simple cliff note edition of an extraordinary event.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about : His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. -Matthew 1.18 NIV

Now what we have here is a world changing statement. What Matthew doesn't tell us is just how that conversation went. Keep in mind that being betrothed in those days meant that you did not live together nor did you have the extra benefits of marriage. Making this all the more of a conversation starter for Mary when she saw Joseph.

Let's imagine for a minute as human beings how this would play out. Ladies your fiancée is out of town on a business trip and low and behold you find yourself pregnant. Big problem right? Yet you have never been with anyone and Joe will be home in time for supper today and you have to figure out how to break this news to

him. So you come up with this story that you had a visitor, something that he would figure out when you told him you were with child. "But wait Joe", you say, "An angel came and told me that I would be pregnant and that it would be God's son." How's it working so far? Not well in our minds, but Mary had made a decision already that this was her story and she was sticking to it. We read a bit more detail when we go to Dr. Luke's telling of this encounter. She had had this conversation already and wrestled it through with the angel Gabriel and he explained to her what God was doing and her response was:

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Then the angel left her. Luke 1.38 NIV

She had decided at that moment that whatever God wanted her to do she would do it. Knowing full well that there would be a cost in this journey. The challenge now was to help Joseph understand. OK guy's now its your turn. You live in that same small town where everyone knows everyones business. You come home from work looking for a nice quiet dinner with the love of your life and she drops this bomb on you. There are many responses. "Ok honey" probably would not be high on your list of options and it certainly wasn't for Joseph either. We read again in Matthew-

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1.19 NIV

Joseph understood what was supposed to happen. It was clear in the law. The question for Joseph at this point was: "who's the guy, and how do I move forward from here?" The scripture again is clear. The law states:

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death---the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you. Deuteronomy 22.23-24 NIV

Its quite obvious that he loves Mary, but its also quite obvious that he doesn't believe her either. That is until an angel pays him a visit that will change his life forever.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, 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." Matthew 1.20-21 NIV

There are some things here for us to understand. First, as crazy as the story was that Mary told him he wasn't quick to blow the lid off of the whole thing. He made a decision but did not act too hastily. Second, he heard from God through an angel confirming Mary's story. Now he had a decision to make because it would change his life forever. He was told that he would name the child. In essence he was told

by the Angel you will be his father. Let the small town gossip train leave the station.

Transition and application: There is a common denominator contained within Matthew's and Luke's telling of this life changing event. Luke gives us a happy account of a young Mary hearing God and obeying. Joseph, shocked to find out his fiancée is pregnant struggled until his dream. Both were encouraged by the angel to not be afraid.

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. -Luke 1.30 NIV

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. -Matthew 1.20 NIV

They would need that encouragement, as do we in many area's of our lives. When God speaks and interjects himself into our lives it is always for our betterment. He comes with a challenge for each of us, yet we are not to be afraid. That is a great cause for hope in a world that is full of fear and chaos. We serve a God who is above it all at the same time he is in it all. So our second takeaway today has to do with something that nobody likes.

2. Exile - I'll name him for he is mine.

I want us to understand something. Joseph was willingly taking on the sin of pre-marital sex and would be forever seen as a sinner and lawbreaker. Something he

did not do. Mary willingly took on the shame of a woman who broke covenant with God and her husband, which she did not do. All in order for God's plan of saving his people from the very real sin that was in their lives. The name of Joseph's son was to be Jesus, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. Which means: God saves. **"You are to give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." -Matthew 1.21b**

We sometimes forget, too often actually that God calls us to things that require us to step out beyond where we wish to go. Sometimes it seems like we are being put into exile in order for God to get through to us and accomplish his plan in our lives. Only you know these areas. Sometimes he takes something away until we understand that he is God and we are not. Maybe we struggle with trusting him in area's of finances, job, relationships. He will bring us to that place which seems like the desert and exile. We have great examples before us in Mary and Joseph. They understood the scriptures and the consequences. They also trusted God and knew that he was faithful.

Remember also that Joseph and Mary lived in a small town. One roughly the size of Saxton's River VT. There would be no hiding this shame. By their willingness to be obedient to God, they put themselves into exile in their own home town. People would shun them, talk about them, accuse them. They would be put out of Synagogue, and bring shame on both of their families. All because they said yes to God.

Transition and application: Following God into whatever he calls us to has a cost. We may feel all alone at times and think that he has abandoned us. We may not have the answers for those tough questions of "Why God?" We have to trust

and have faith that God has come to save us and set us on a journey toward him. Most often that will require that we walk into exile, perceived or actual in order to get to where God is calling us. That will require our third takeaway:

3. Radical obedience - Stand alone together.

Joseph wakes up and realizes that he jumped the gun in not believing Mary. He wastes no time in doing what he is instructed.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. - Matthew 1.24-25 NIV

Imagine the relief Mary felt after a night of worry. She knew the penalty. She understood the consequences of her story if Joseph didn't come back with a changed heart. I bet she was on her face praying that God would speak to her other half.

My professor last semester, made a great statement when looking at how God operates and brings about his plan. He said in relation to Paul's Damascus road experience and conversion that while that was going on God was talking to a man in Damascus named Ananias, telling him to get ready to go and talk to this man and tell him what I have set him aside for. There's a faith challenge for us all. When God calls us he WILL always be speaking to the other half of the equation preparing the way. So it was with Joseph.

God spoke, and Joseph came back with more than a changed heart. Even though they would be looked at as though they had broken their covenant vows, they did not come together until after Jesus was born. Let me ask you guys, would you have done what Joseph did? Would you have bought the dream as fact or wishful thinking?

Remember that God speaks. When called to crazy things like Mary and Joseph we have to remember- GOD SPEAKS. As crazy as the mission was, they obeyed. I suspect it was more than just that she was favored and he was righteous. They were that way because they had built a life that centered on what God would have them do. So that when he showed up with what turned out to be the most radical salvation mission ever presented, they were on board. Even if it meant a spiritual exile and shunning. There wasn't a question- they had heard from God. How did they know? I'm convinced it was because they were used to hearing him speak, because they talked to him. He still speaks today. Can we get so used to his voice that when he calls us to something way outside of our comfort zone we are willing no matter what the cost to follow in obedience?

You see, once they settled in their hearts that God had called them, the next step was to tell the families. We tend not to think about that. This would be no easy task. Remember, their culture was not our culture. Mary and Joseph stand as great examples for us. They were young people who were willing to risk it all because they knew they had heard from God. How many of us are willing to do such things? God doesn't always call us to easy things. Joseph and Mary decided in their hearts that this was their journey, even if it would put them into exile. Joseph would name him and let people believe that he was the father of the child in Mary's womb. That's radical obedience.

But it doesn't end there. Matthew takes our advent scripture from Isaiah, (7.14) **Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,** a verse that was never understood as a reference to the coming Messiah, Matthew reframes it around Jesus as the one it is speaking of. (*explain this a bit*) Matthew gives us in this prophesy the great fulfillment of the hope of Israel and now the world - that God was visiting his people and would dwell among us. He also in the most beautiful way gives us the why of "God with us." It is not just a day of his visitation, his arrival would signal the beginning of New Creation and the restoration of all that we have broken. It is the beginning of his redemption plan, the saving of his people from our sins. Jesus-Our salvation is in FACT Emmanuel-God with us.

Conclusion:

That is cause for hope, for joy and for peace. When we are walking in exile moments and being challenged by God to step out in obedience that makes sense only to him, we should not be waiting for *something* to happen, but for *someone* to show up and dwell among and within us.

Bow to pray and have a time at the altar.