

Sermon: God will Honor It

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

4th Sunday of Advent

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Today's Old Testament reading is Isaiah 7:10-16, where Isaiah is given the task to convince King Ahaz for help as two other kings have joined forces to attack Jerusalem. As Isaiah prophesied about Ahaz's decision, his prophecy also shed light to an Immanuel promise, of a child who would bring salvation to all. Hear now the Word of God brought to the people of Israel during their dark days.

Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." ¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Amen.

Our Gospel reading today is Matthew 1:18-25, the very beginning of the nativity story by the author following the genealogy of Jesus. Hear now how the good news of the birth of our Savior unfolds through Matthew to all of us this morning.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah! took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, for you there isn't a day that goes by without showing us your love. Open our hearts to be filled with your love through your Word at this time. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

There is power in words. All of us heard this old saying, *sticks and stones may break my bones, but the words will never hurt (break) me*, and we know that when the powerful words are spoken without thought or care, it can inflict much pain. Yet, this mantra helped many of us to build resilience through those tough and hard times in our life's journey, especially when circumstances and words of others seemed to try to knock us down from doing the right things.

When it comes to the story of Jesus' birth, we remember the joys of many characters in the nativity story through their words. We remember the words of the Magi, who visits King Herod, asking for "the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship Him."¹ When the shepherds saw the angel, they said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."²

Then, there is Mary, mother of Jesus, has her beautiful praises, the Magnificat, with her famous words, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... Surely from now on all generations will call me bless."³

This is Mary's praising while sharing her news of pregnancy with Elizabeth, knowing full well what it means to be a woman with a child out of wedlock in that culture. Like the mantra we heard before, Mary repeats it as a prayer but also to herself, with a conviction through faith and understanding that there is a promise of God's, that she knew that God would honor God's Words.

Yet, in today's gospel passage, the main character remains voiceless. Joseph, who was a righteous man, who must have been working hard and diligent, not only in the eyes of the people but also in the eyes of God, whom we would call the salt of the Earth, suddenly has this problem of his fiancée bearing and holding a child that is not his. When his honor was about to be tainted by someone other than him, Joseph still chose to be honorable. Today's passage says when Joseph had resolved to be honorable and to save Mary from public disgrace, that is when the angel of the Lord appeared. God saw the honor in Joseph and God also honored it back. God saw the good and righteous in Joseph and God shared God's good and righteous plan through a messenger.

Although words have tremendous power, sometimes, a non-verbal action speak louder than words - just like how Joseph awoke from his dream and just acted out his answer. What would have caused Joseph to have such confidence to change his resolve and do what the angel asked him to do, commanded him to do, in his dream? I believe there are two things which made him turnaround from his decision and suddenly become strong and courageous to act out what he has been called to do. The first is that he had a type of faith that trusted that God would redeem him, that God would honor him through God's promises. No matter what would take place afterwards, God will be the one who will continue to pave a path forward for Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus, even when the rumors and words of the social circles around them might say otherwise. To better understand this, we need to have an understanding what Hebrew marriage is like. Hebrew marriage is a two-fold process. Engagement was the first part of marriage ceremony, where the groom gets the permission from the father of the bride and bride accepts a small token from him. Once engagement takes place, the marriage would be validated and betrothal period begins, where

¹ Matthew 2:2

² Luke 2:15

³ Luke 1:48

the groom would go back to his town and start building a home and prepare a dowry for the bride's family. Technically after engagement, a couple would be considered married, hence Joseph is referred as a husband in today's story. After some period to prepare a home and the gifts, the groom would go back to bring his bride back with him after a 7-day a second wedding ceremony, where the marriage would be consecrated. Therefore, today's story takes during the betrothal period when Joseph is back at his own town working to prepare to bring Mary home and to find out that she is pregnant while he was away. To take her as his wife, it would not be a hidden fact to the public during the 7-day feasting of the second ceremony, that he was not the father of the child.

Therefore, when Joseph decides to answer God's call, it was with faith, knowing that God will deliver them and to prepare a way from all the eyes that are watching the family. Joseph's act also showed that he trusted the angel's message of this child, Jesus, who will save his people from their sins as the angel proclaimed. The fact that we are told that Joseph is a righteous man tells us that he must be well versed and trusted the Word of God given through the prophets of old. He had a faith that believed that Jesus was really going to be a Savior for all God's people from their sins – something greater than for himself – which tipped over to change his mind from divorcing his wife.

Secondly, even though it is not written, Joseph must have loved Mary very deeply to risk everything that was his and put it on the line to not only make her his wife but to take in a son who is not his, to provide for, to protect, and to love him as his own. Joseph being righteous does not make him ignorant of what is to come. His way of planning a discrete divorce for Mary shows that Joseph understood the hardship of survival and had both intellectual and emotional quotient. He knew that he had to navigate unplanned, uncharted courses in the future with this decision of answering God's call. Although Joseph might have not known at this point in the story about how he will travel to Egypt and back to survive in the lands that he did not know, yet through Joseph's protection, provisions, and love, Jesus reaches his maturity to begin his ministry on earth. So how is Joseph honored by God? Of many names given for Jesus, he is also known as the Jesus of the Nazareth, the carpenter's son. Loving someone does not simply take words but speaks through actions. It is truly type of a word that cannot envelope the totality of its feelings and thoughts.

To this day, it is something that all of us receive every day from our Redeemer. We might not hear it, we might not feel it, but God continues to act out God's love for us each and every day. When I tell you in confidence and boldness that we are a beloved child of God, it is only the tip of the iceberg description of what God has prepared for each of us in terms of pouring out God's love.

Just like how God honored the promises of the Old Testament prophets by making and sending God's one and only Son to us, God will continue to honor us by answering God's promises written from cover to cover of the God's holy Word. That God's love is enough to overcome all things. The one that we are waiting expectantly, not only on Christmas but daily in our hearts, Jesus is indeed a redemptive Savior who will rescue us from our sins.

So do not let our words be the only one that does the talking this Advent and Christmas. Take the leap of faith. Make a bigger splash into the pool of faith. Let us dare to take some risks. Let us go out to tell our neighbors that we love them and that Christ loves them too. Be the source of blessing by sharing and spreading the joy of Christmas morn, like the shepherds did on that very first Christmas day, like the Magi who brought the gifts of life, let us bring the gift to life to those who are in need through random act of kindness throughout your days. And may we know, that God who sees all things done in secret will also honor it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.