

Dunbarton Congregational Church

Sunday, December 17, 2006

10:30 a.m.

Advent III

Matthew 1:18-25

*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 with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel',*

*which means, 'God is with us.' <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;\* and he named him Jesus.*

Well, friends, it is week three and there are yet more angels in the air! Today we have three of them, or one angel appearing three times: the one who says, "Joseph, marry the woman who is not carrying your child," the one who says, "Joseph, I know you've been through heck but you must grab everything and flee to Egypt," and the one who says, "Joseph, you can turn around and go back home now." If we thought Gabriel had an uphill battle last week persuading Mary to be the Mother of God, imagine the heavenly effort involved in bringing Joseph on board.

You know, I think there is a truism in life: that the less we know about a person the more we imagine. An absence of information creates a natural vacuum into which floods all our desires and projections. I mention this because of all the characters in Scripture, Joseph is one of the most *well-imagined*. What, after all, do we really know about the man? Luke tells us that Joseph lives in Nazareth but is connected to Bethlehem through his Davidic ancestry. Luke also teaches us that Joseph is a pious Jew, presenting his newborn son at the temple after Mary's post-partum purification period. But that's about it for Luke, and John's gospel, written after Matthew and Luke, simply follows tradition and refers to Jesus as "Joseph's son."

When it comes to Joseph, I fear we surmise far more than we are given. Yet it is in today's scripture and Matthew's gospel that we encounter Joseph in his fullest form. Matthew 13:55 identifies Joseph as a carpenter. This renders him a poor tradesman, probably settling in Nazareth to be near Sepphoris, a Hellenistic city being built by Herod Antipas. In Matthew 1:18, we learn that Mary is betrothed to Joseph and, horror of horrors, that she has become pregnant before the consummation of their marriage. Because of Joseph's "righteousness" says verse 19, he is of a mind to divorce her quietly, though divorces in first century Palestine were never quiet. At least two people, including her father, would most likely

have been involved.

What is God to do! A divorce does not fit into the divine plot! Get ready angels; this is your mission should you choose to accept it.

A week ago last Friday, Bill and I went to see "The Nativity Story." It's hardly the blockbuster hit New Line Cinema hoped it would be, but I must tell you we enjoyed it. Okay, so Mary is portrayed by an Australian, Keisha Castle-Hughes, and Joseph by Guatemalan born Oscar Isaac. Yes, it was rushed to production to beat all the other Nativity screenplays clamoring for the light of day. But Director Catherine Hardwicke makes an earnest effort to be accurate, requiring her cast to build homes, press olives and grapes, make bread, milk goats and make cheese all first century style.

Three things, in particular, are well presented. First, Mary and Joseph are poor, and I mean poor. Second, Herod and the Romans are cruel, and I mean cruel. Third, and most important, this is no love story. This was an arranged marriage between Joseph and Mary's father. Mary had no say in the matter. Whatever fantasies may linger of love at first sight or happily ever after, the gritty work of partnership and covenant is powerfully conveyed in the film.

I wish every couple I have ever married could see this film. I wish every couple *period* could see it. I may assign it to future brides and grooms who so innocently take the love they feel for one another for granted and make the glorification of their relationship the highest good in their lives. I wish all of us could see during this Advent time the powerful message God is sending about our purpose in the world. Two poor, struggling, disenfranchised, ignominious Jews take a situation that holds the seeds of shame and disaster in it and instead consecrate their marriage to a higher good, to the upholding of their faith and history and identity and the fulfillment of a people's destiny in the raising of a God-child, Jesus. No matter what vows couples choose to say on their wedding day, this notion of God-inspired lives---two individuals whose mission is to love the Lord with all their hearts and minds and soul and strength---is largely lost in our culture today, and I think it does take angels, not fluffy cherubic ones, but full-winged, God-powered, life-shattering Christmas ones to do the job.

Now I want you to think about the most significant relationship in your life, not just the love you share or shared with a partner, but perhaps your relationship with a child, a parent, a best friend. If you are lucky, you'll be spending the holidays with this person. So let me ask you, what is the higher purpose of your relationship? Is it something you've discussed? What is it that you have directly or indirectly vowed before God to accomplish together in this world? Maybe you haven't vowed anything, or maybe you took some vows so long ago you can't remember what you said at all. I bet you promised to make one another happy, to facilitate each other's self-actualization, to stand by one another in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, and perhaps even until death do you part.

But Mary and Joseph, my friends, have a larger story to tell---to you and to me and to the world---about the real meaning of joy in relationship and it is by angels, and perhaps only by angels, that we are reminded: *we are never enough of an end in ourselves.*

As you may have read in my infamous Concord Monitor article, my dear friend Sr. Bridget Haase went on Sabbatical this summer thanks to a grant from the Lily Endowment. One of the things she did during

her meditation time was to develop a mission statement for her life. Seriously, in less than ten words, she came up with a description of why she feels God put her on this earth. This is what aspiring entrepreneurs call their “elevator pitch,” the message you give potential investors between the first floor and the tenth.

Isn't this a wonderful idea?! Imagine writing a mission statement for your marriage. How about one for your family, or a special friendship? What will you as partners in life commit yourselves to? It's a powerful task. It took Bridget eight weeks to get her thoughts straight and another month to write them down. What I expect most of us would discover is a disconnect between what we hope to accomplish and the way our lives are lived. Is our greater good the better job, the higher income, the best vacation, the best stuff? What is your *family's* mission statement? How will you together serve God's larger plan, because you see if we are to call ourselves Christians, and Christmas is about the coming of our savior Jesus Christ into the world, then our lives like that precarious couple on the road to Bethlehem must be, *must be*, about serving God.

If there was one aspect of The Nativity Story that was weak, it was in the angel department. The only celestial being to appear is some half-baked light-enshrouded humanoid Gabriel who is so kindly he wouldn't scare a two year old. Where is the fullness and power of God's messenger! Where is Joseph's dream angel, a specter so daunting it begs no reply, sending Joseph running to Mary to intercept the divorce decree before it reaches her hands and is in Jewish law no longer revocable. Joseph's angel reminds us yet again, it's not about us, it's not about us, it's not about us, and what an incredible gift to give ourselves and our children this Christmas, a shared sense of purpose that is clear and specific and said out loud: “this is what we stand for.”

I'd like to close with a suggestion. Talk with the significant others in your lives about a mission statement for your relationship. Write it down, ten words or less. Put it on your wall like they do at the office. I'm sure the one at work doesn't involve Jesus Christ or the Kingdom of God. Ask your grandmother to needlepoint it for a pillow. There are angels to guide us this Christmas season. Who knows, with a little help, we may actually grow into our role in God's great plan.

Amen.