

Rev. Seth D. Bode † Sermon 067, 12-22-2013 † Advent 4

“Lord God, you have appointed me as pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument – but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

**Matthew 1**

*<sup>18</sup>This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately. <sup>20</sup>But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>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.”*

*<sup>22</sup>All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”*

*<sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.*



Measure twice, cut once. There’s a little bit of carpentry advice. Advice for a man like Joseph to live by. Joseph was used to measuring carefully before he cut that piece of wood for that table or that door ... or selecting that bride-to-be.

But there was no measuring what Joseph discovered about his betrothed. How devastating! When Mary first revealed the news of her pregnancy to him, only one thing was clear to Joseph; he was not the father.

So it seemed that the measured carpenter was caught up in a trashy soap opera, cheated on and betrayed. But what he didn’t know would change everything. This situation was unlike anything that had ever been heard of since the world began.

Our Advent readings have all included people streaming to the Lord, looking to God for the way to peace, joy, and love. Everyone who grapples with God's moral Law that shows their sin, and then wrestles with God's loving Gospel, discovers sooner or later that Jesus came for each of us personally. Joseph could have really taken it as a personal jab from God.

Instead, he demonstrated faithful character. When it mattered most, he took God's role for him with great character and humility. Although the measurements were all out of place, we can learn a little something from Joseph.

We can learn ... **The Character Of The Carpenter.**

1. *Humility before the Spirit*
2. *Humility before the Son*

In the Jewish mind, the betrothal was always understood as more formal, more than a promise of engagement, but a formal contract including witnesses. If you wanted out of the betrothal, it was on the level of divorce. This was their culture. It could lead to **public disgrace** to the point of death. See Lev. 20:10, "*If a man commits adultery with the wife of another man, if he commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress must certainly be put to death.*"

For whatever reason, Joseph did not want that. Did he believe her? Did he doubt Gabriel's visit to her? There was a private legal arrangement in which Joseph drew up a bill of divorce himself, thus avoiding a complete public disgrace. See Deut. 24:1, "*When a man takes a woman and marries her, if she is not pleasing to him because he has found something indecent about her ... he writes her a divorce document and hands it to her and sends her out of his house.*"

St. Matthew gives us these things in great tension, a dramatic irony that you and I see the character of this faithful man. Joseph is called "righteous." He wasn't closer to God than anyone else with faith in the promises of God. However, God considers a believer, someone with faith, righteous. Part of that faith means acting honorably and humbly.

I was thinking about this: If Joseph had grown upset and furious and threw things, who could have blamed him? If Joseph had gone out to the forest to split wood for a few weeks, how understandable wouldn't that be to us? If Joseph had crumbled in a corner and wept from the depths of his broken heart, we'd get it.

From Joseph's perspective, Mary had undoubtedly done something wrong, sinful in the eyes of man and of God. But Joseph did not take it upon himself to be judge, jury, and executioner. Our God promises that He will "*judge the*

*peoples with equity*” (Psa. 96:10). If Joseph was tempted to cast a superior eye on Mary, we would never know it, because this was a man with character, a good example of faith and humility. Yet ... who was Joseph to sort this all out?

For Joseph, there was only one thing to do—trust in God. “*Cast all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.*”

So we see the Holy Spirit’s work on Joseph’s heart, “*As he was considering these things*” (v. 20). Suddenly, a vision of an angel! The Bible literally says, “*Look! An angel of the Lord appeared...*” Consider the timing of the vision and Joseph’s state of mind. For the carpenter who (doubtless) measured all of his cuts like a wood surgeon, still another measureless twist of circumstances.

God wanted to assure Joseph this was a legitimate, although unusual, pregnancy. God wanted to take this man of character and use him as the foster father of the Messiah, the chosen One, the promised Savior of the world. When Joseph’s measurements failed on the grand scale ... **GOD has measured.**

How have your prior life measurements unfolded and played out? Do you tread life so carefully that one twist, one altered set of circumstances, or one break in the day’s goals can send you into a fit? Are you wringing your hands because the course you mapped out and measured has fallen to shambles?

As it turned out, God’s Spirit has searched and measured every heart and found us wanting, unable to measure up. The name for not measuring up to perfection is “sin.” If He hasn’t already, watch out; because God may allow, even introduce, something into your life that dramatically cuts to your personal core. That’s fair game in a world of sin. Consider it a wakeup call. It may be collateral damage of another person’s mistakes; it may be the series of events leading to something better; it may be the Lord addressing our doubt about Him; or it may be the consequences of your closest pet sin. Sometimes, the best thing that can happen is that we are changed by truth—and forced to adapt.

Literally it happened overnight for Joseph. Truth confronted him, and he humbly put his faith in God’s set of circumstances—humility before the Spirit. Joseph would now take care of Mary, provide her with room and board.

So he would not just have this meaningless, unimportant minor role in the epic Christmas account. God would give Joseph a front row seat to the Savior of all the world, the little Lord Jesus.

- Joseph would bring Mary down to Bethlehem to enroll as citizens of the Roman government;
- Joseph would be one of two people to see the virgin birth, and cradle the little Savior baby in a manger;
- Joseph would be there to call Jesus by His heaven-sent name.

The name “Jesus” means “Jehovah saves.” The Christ child would not bring abrupt, unplanned salvation, but Jehovah’s promised, foretold salvation. There are many saviors ... doctors, nurses, firemen, police. But there is only one Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. His name “Jesus” literally means, “He saves,” or “Savior.” His salvation isn’t temporary, for the next seventy years or eighty, if we have the strength. His saving is permanent.

*“He will save His people from their sins.”* With salvation there is always a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*, a starting point and a finishing point, a point A and a point B. What was the starting point for those being saved? They started in sin, the curse of God, the power of Satan, death and hell; by the saving work of Jesus, they would finish in adoption, peace of conscience, the gift of the Spirit, and life everlasting. This specific use of the word places Jesus in contrast to all others who might be called *savior*.

But Jesus could not have been the world’s Savior if He were not also Emmanuel. (Matthew appeals to the passage in Isaiah that doesn’t say “Jesus” but “Emmanuel.”) The name means “with us, God.” This “Emmanuel” is not the name Jesus was to receive at the circumcision, but nevertheless His name as an expression of what He really is and why He could be Jesus. (If Jesus had not been Emmanuel, He would not have been Jesus.) “Emmanuel,” “God with us.”

Much later, Jesus Christ would say about Himself, *“Surely I am with you always.”* This does not mean mere moral support that He gives us, but His presence with us. God is no longer separated, a stranger, alienated from man, since the union of God and man in the person of Christ. Emmanuel unites God with man and man with God. In Emmanuel we have access to God. God is with us. No one can harm us.

In this Gospel, find the kind of faith and character to be humble before the Son. So we have a God who strikes to the heart personally and challenges us with difficult life situations. Good! That may make you a little like Joseph. That just shows God is true God and has a deep love for you personally. He demonstrated it by sending His Son in the manger and His Holy Spirit in Word and sacrament. This was not to give you a minor role, but a front row seat to the One who does *immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His great power that is at work within us.*

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

*Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*