

Love Kins

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2013

Gordon Wiersma

Texts: Matt.1:18-25 & Rom.1:1-7

The GIFT Class here is the 8th-9th grade church school class – and one of the things I do with the GIFT Class during Advent is look at some images of works of art specifically having to do with the birth stories of Jesus. As we prepare to look at those images I remind the class that none of the artists were eyewitnesses to these events – which is hardly a profound scholarly insight! but it is actually a surprisingly helpful reminder...that these images are not just a snapshot of an event but that the art is presenting the story in a certain way – the details included and the way they're presented reveal what the artist thinks is interesting or meaningful about the story - the image interprets the story and teaches it. That's as much as I should try to say about image interpretation – if you want more, then there is a fabulous art historian I know that I can refer you to...☺

I'll come back to those images, but first want to take note of the same sort of thing for when we READ the nativity stories – which is that Luke and Matthew, the 2 gospel writers that include those stories, were not present for these stories. The stories were collected, passed on in the early Christian community – which is a very interesting process to delve into in itself. But for us it's enough simply to remind ourselves of the obvious point that for this story in Matthew, Matthew was not present – obvious, but it helps alert us to the importance of noticing HOW the story is told – that the story is being interpreted for, taught to, those who receive it.

So here's the story in Matthew, before, during and after the passage we heard this morning:

- it starts with a genealogy placing Joseph in the lineage of the royal house of David & then we hear of a woman Mary, engaged to Joseph, 'but she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit'
- a woman pregnant before marriage is a crisis of culture, morals, and law – devastating and dangerous - but Joseph tries to work things out quietly rather than making a public spectacle of Mary – end things with Mary without making waves
- but instead, in a dream an angel of the Lord tells Joseph: 'Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit... don't be afraid, take Mary to be your wife – she will bear a child that is a Savior, Jesus'
- Joseph follows the word from the angel and takes Mary as his wife, and we are told 'but Joseph had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son - and they named him Jesus'
- after that comes the visit of the Magi; then the story of King Herod, Roman ruler of the region who seeks to kill the child Jesus; and then in a series of 3 more dreams, Joseph is guided to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, told after Herod's death that it is safe for them to return, and directed to settle in the region of Galilee, the town of Nazareth

Alright – that's the story - so what might one notice about Matthew's telling of the story? well how about this: it's all about Joseph, Joseph, Joseph! Whereas if you'd look at the nativity stories in Luke instead, it's all about Mary, Mary, Mary. I counted, and in Matthew Joseph is named 9 times and Mary 4 times, while in Luke Mary is named 11 times, and Joseph only 3 times. We should wonder why that is...and today I'd like to offer one idea of the 'why' for the focus on Joseph in

Matthew that, while interesting, is I think fairly obvious; and then another idea for ‘why’ the focus on Joseph that is less obvious but maybe even more interesting.

The obvious reason for Matthew’s focus on Joseph is to present the birth of Jesus as a fulfillment of God’s word to the people of Israel – a word given in the Hebrew scriptures and carried in the faith of the Jewish people. The crucial strands in that word of God were God’s promise to send a Messiah (Savior/King) to save Israel; this Messiah coming from the royal house of David; and the words of prophets pointing to this Messiah. Well, you as you read the birth story of Jesus in Matthew and all of those strands are woven together into a complete fabric: the patriarchal line of Jesus’ comes through Joseph, who is from the lineage of David; Jesus is described in the crucial terms of Messiah and Savior; and throughout the stories the Hebrew prophets are referenced, their words echoing in the events of Jesus’ birth. The fabric of this story was crucial for the early church in conversation with Judaism and remained central for the church in seeing its faith in Christ as fulfilling the saving work of God in Israel. So - OK - Joseph carries that storyline of fulfillment, and that’s good.

But let’s look at this story in another way too. And to do that, we need to receive a lens for this story from the Epistle to the Romans that we heard today. In the opening to the letter to the Romans (1 sentence for 7 verses!), I want us to notice this – that Paul refers to Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of scripture in being born, but then says ‘declared to be Son of God by the spirit of holiness (Holy Spirit) by resurrection from the dead’ - what does that mean? It is Paul’s shorthand for this truth that shapes the church: that the resurrection is the lens through which we understand Christ. It is the truth that all the stories of Jesus and the church echo

from the Risen Christ. And so, it directs us to look at these birth stories of Matthew too through a resurrection lens.

How does it look to view these nativity stories in Matthew through that resurrection lens? Well, it is looking for the narrative of life lived in a way that is not beholdng to death – not ruled, controlled, conformed by death – which is what the resurrection of Christ embodies and proclaims. It is the church given eyes to see in stories that kind of resurrection power from God – to say ‘aha...HERE’S what’s happening: a life not held in the power of death!’ The church saw that in stories of Israel, in the words of the prophets, in the very interesting women included in the genealogy of Matthew’s gospel (which has been the focus of our adult ed series this Advent), AND also saw that in Joseph. Romans tell us to look at this story not just as a tidy formula of prophetic fulfillment – that’s important but not all that is there - the church is seeing and telling this through the lens of the resurrection, and when you do so, there is also much to see in the person of Joseph:

- in that culture, when Mary is found to be pregnant, Joseph has power: power to condemn Mary... power to shame or even kill Mary; instead Joseph uses his power to protect her; it is an incredibly brave act of love Joseph expresses first in protecting and then in marrying this pregnant Mary; and then we’re given the detail too about Joseph and Mary not having marital relations until after Jesus’ birth – well, that’s not just a theological checkpoint, there is great tenderness and love in that too.
- we also see in the story that Joseph is open to God’s Spirit, calling, voice, again and again; we see a life open to being called into the life-giving ways God reveals
- and then once Joseph decides to be a part of this complicated situation rather than distancing himself from it, he is all in: fleeing from a rabid King Herod,

living as a refugee in Egypt, settling in Nazareth. It is a call/command/choice that inalterably impacts and shapes his life.

What is this story? – it is a person living not beholdng to the ways of death: deadly things like reputation, retaliation, convenience, fear, security, threats, violence – those do not control him; and instead making choices that make way for life, love, courage, hope. Joseph is a resurrection story - someone who shows the presence and promise of living that is not beholdng to death. The same is true for Mary – living past fear, turned to life - but you need to read Luke for that!

Receiving that view into these stories strikes me as so essential – that these are not just stories setting the stage for something important later – not just getting the right pieces into place for the real story later in the passion and resurrection; these people, Joseph and Mary, they ARE the story too: here we find God’s same Spirit of holiness at work as in the resurrection – and if you would want to get really mystical about it, you could say we see the Spirit of the Risen Christ at work in this story...but we can explore that more another time. Here in Matthew is not just a theological checklist to certify Jesus as Savior – here is the remarkable truth that the story of salvation quite shockingly reads like this: a young couple with an out of wedlock child; a family fleeing for their lives from a tyrant; the story of a CHILD, human born, protected and loved by parents. These stories are told not as pawns playing out a carefully routed theological script - these are people in whom the Spirit of life is present, accompanying God’s story of salvation into history – the kind of story that perhaps only a resurrection lens could believe at all.

OK – so finally back to those images. What we notice in GIFT class is, that despite Matthew’s focus on Joseph, in most all the images of the nativity, Joseph is not the

focus at all – he is often off to the side, sometimes his face not even shown – he is a periphery figure – Mary and the Christ child are at the forefront. And when I visited Nazareth several years ago I visited the basilica of Mary which is one of the most grand, joyful, brilliant places I have ever been – and connected to it is a very, very, small humble chapel dedicated to Joseph. And, truth is, in Matthew’s gospel, after the first 3 chapters – Joseph is never mentioned again.

But you see, that’s actually part of the beauty of it – this story is not a competition or popularity contest. Joseph had a crucial, small part to play - and Joseph was faithful to it. Which means it wasn’t just playing out a part, but being a person embraced by God’s Holy Spirit of life – a life we recognize through resurrection eyes. There is plenty to focus on in Mary, and thank God for her – but all of us are much more like Joseph– we have a little part, called in our lives to touch this world with the Spirit of Christ, of life, not beholding to death – not beholding to reputation, retaliation, convenience, fear, security, threats, violence – those are not the ways we answer too; but love, faithfulness, courage, hope – that is the story to which we are joined. It’s just a little part we have to play, but as we do, Christmas carols echo, Easter anthems ring, and we discover that such resurrection life is what God has made us for – as Pastor Jill riffed on last week: it is our home, it is in our blood and our birthright, it is who we are. It is the way that we too accompany God’s way of salvation into being.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.