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First Things – Matthew 1:18-25

This Advent, we're going on a journey. No, we're not all going to pack up and go somewhere else, literally; but we'll look at Scriptures about the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the one who will save his people from their sins, and the journeys these passages portray.

Today, it's Joseph's journey. We really don't know that much about him from the Bible, just that he was a devout man. We think he was probably somewhat older than Mary, and that he was stable, fairly well-off, and was able to convince Mary's parents that he would make a good son-in-law. But, as today's lesson points out, as the two of them get closer to the big day, well, Mary's getting bigger, and not in a way one would expect in those times. She's obviously pregnant.

We don't know what, if any, conversation took place between Joseph and Mary; but we do know that Joseph "decided to divorce her quietly." Interesting that one had to get a divorce from engagement; remember those old lawsuits jilted brides and grooms once brought for "breach of promise?" And it also reminds us of the customs of so many cultures, where a woman is, quite literally, ruined by premarital pregnancy; even here in America today, where the thought of what

seems like infidelity still can be deadly to the transgressor. “Crimes of passion,” the Europeans call them.

So, imagine for a moment you are Joseph. Even in today’s world, whether you’re a man or a woman, imagine your feelings if you discovered your betrothed was obviously unfaithful. How would you feel? Hurt? Definitely. Angry? Probably. Perhaps even violently so. Joseph and Mary lived in a culture where such things merited publicly-sanctioned execution. And if Joseph and Mary *did* talk about it, who on earth would believe her story about the angel and the Holy Spirit and all that? Would you?

But Joseph is different, and that’s why he is able to take this journey. He doesn’t publicly accuse her, though he does plan to untie the engagement. Then, something very special happens: he has a dream. And in this dream, an angel appears to *him* and tells him not to be *afraid* of this marriage; that something miraculous is about to happen and he is going to be in a front-row seat for it.

This is really important. The God Joseph knows so well doesn’t act like this, at least as far as he knows... or does he? Joseph clearly decides to find out.

He sticks with Mary: and there’s his journey, from this conventional, stable, upright guy to someone not sure what God will do

next – at least the start of it. Joseph decides to stay with Mary. That meant his mind had to shift, his faith had to be rearranged.

Now, we also have our ideas of how God acts; for many of us, like Joseph, they are ideas we learned as children and never had reason to question or challenge. But things – and you and I – change; the world we knew years ago is not the world we live in today, and while it's very clear now, things have always been changing. Most people change the way they look at the world as they grow and mature and learn; there's a line from, of all things, a Rolling Stones song from the mid-sixties, "Doing things we used to do/they think are mean/I sit and watch/as tears go by..."

Today, the first step of our journey for Advent is to look at how you think of God. Is God the cosmic cop? A gentle shepherd? Sitting and watching the world spin out of control, unable or unwilling to do anything about it? Or does God represent a set of rules, carved in stone, but which you may not understand as well as you think? I challenge you to rethink them, like Joseph did when he confronted Mary's pregnancy and had his dream: I don't know anyone who reads the Bible frequently and deeply who isn't regularly surprised by what they find in passages they've read dozens of times before; have you refreshed your faith, made sure your understanding of God fits how God has acted in the life he's given you?

This isn't easy. It is a journey, an adventure, even, especially for those who have settled into a comfortable, unchanging concept of God. But God is alive, God is doing new things in and through this world, this church, *you*, that you may have a hard time believing, just as Joseph might well have had a hard time believing Mary's story of the angel.

Anne Lamott, a very frisky Christian author, recently wrote about her favorite story:

“The people in [a study of autism in adults] had never been able (or maybe willing) to walk alone. The researchers discovered that if they attached a rope from one end of the room to the other, helped people get to their feet, and put their hand on the rope, the people with autism would hold on and walk across the room. Over time, the researchers used thinner and thinner rope, with the same results. People would hold on to the rope, walk across the room. The researchers put up laundry cord, twine, and then eventually fishing line, which is basically invisible. But people would still take hold, and walk across the room.

“The truly inspired part of the study was that the researchers found that they could cut the fishing line into 12" lengths, hand people a piece, and people would **STILL** walk alone across the room. What a wild, victorious skill.

“And that is why I always used to give each of my writing students a 12" length of fishing line.”

We are going to strike out on a journey of faith this Advent, even if you aren't sure you know how to do it. But God does. God strung a rope for you, long ago, and we're going to walk across the room of faith and see what's on the other side.

The question is, are you still clinging to the rope? Or are you like Joseph, able to take his knowledge of Scripture and his vision from God, like a piece of fishing line, and take this walk, like he did?

Anne Lamott closed her story this way: "Everyone take gentle care, please. Get yourself a nice glass of water, clean socks, and maybe 12 inches of fishing line-"

That's a bit of a trip of faith all by itself. Don't be afraid to take it. Happy Advent.