

"ADVENT LOVE"

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 1:18-25

(12-22-19) Advent 4

Close your eyes, picture Mary, the mother of Jesus, maybe with baby Jesus.

Have you got an image in mind? Maybe it's a painting you've seen; maybe it's a manger creche or a sculpture. Maybe it's a stained glass window image. Maybe it looks something like this. (Mary slide).

Now imagine Joseph. Do you have an image? It's harder isn't it?

Are you thinking of this guy? (Joseph 1)

Did you know that Kevin Sorbo played Joseph?

Maybe you got this image of a guy with a nondescript face, bearded maybe, in a robe, with a staff in his hand. (Joseph 2)

Problem is that he's not a shepherd, he's a carpenter.

Why would he have a shepherd's staff, maybe it should be a 2x4 instead.

The point being, we don't really have a good grasp on good old Joseph.

He's almost interchangeable. (Nativity)

So much of the Christmas story revolves around Mary, from Luke's gospel account.

We read part of that last week. Luke is where we find the story of the angel visiting Mary and telling her that she will bear the son of God, it's where the story of John the Baptist's birth is told, it's where we read of the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the census, only to find no room at the inn and being forced into a manger out back. It's the gospel where the shepherds are encountered by the angels who tell them not to be afraid.

It's the one where the shepherds gather around the manger with the new born Jesus. There's a genealogy in Luke, but it's likely Mary's, not Joseph's. Luke's is the account of Christmas we all know best and probably like best. But there is another account.

If you read only Luke's Christmas account, you'd be forgiven for forgetting about Joseph. He's just there in the background, off to the side, nondescript, interchangeable. But not in Matthew's gospel. This is different. In this gospel it's Joseph whose front and center. Matthew's gospel starts with a genealogy, Joseph's, which makes it clear that he's not the biological father of Jesus, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't have a role to play, a critical role.

In Matthew, the angel appears to Joseph. **Bet you didn't know that the angel appears 4 times to Joseph, that's right, 4 times,** first to tell him that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit, the next to warn them to flee because Herod is on a murderous rampage, then to let him know to return once Herod dies, then finally to go and settle in a town called Nazareth. He's not just a bystander, he's crucial to the development of the plot.

He's got a crucial choice to make. Before the angel first visited Joseph, he knew something was wrong. Mary, to whom he was engaged, which is more than how we think of engagement these days, it was more of a formal, legal arrangement, Mary was found to be with child. Joseph knows he's not the father. There was only one possible conclusion; her child was from another man. Now when this sort of thing happened, and it did on occasion, the man had a couple of options.

He could tell everyone around how wronged he was, that his fiancée had become pregnant with another man's child. According to the Jewish law, this could lead to the woman being stoned to death. That level of retribution was probably unlikely under Roman occupation, but you get the severity of the situation. The text, however, says that Joseph was a righteous man and he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he planned to dismiss her quietly. Look Mary, I don't know who the father of your child is, but it's clear to me that we aren't going to work out as I thought. I'm letting you go, go marry the other guy. There's the law, then there's the spirit of the law, the spirit of the law giver and Joseph understands the difference. He's a righteous man.

He does the righteous thing, but God asks for more.

When the angel tells him that the child is from the Holy Spirit, that he is to be named Jesus and he will save his people from their sins, that his name means God is with us, Joseph could have woken up, packed his things and ran as fast as his feet could from Mary, from the dream and from a life he never bargained for. And just like Mary, no one could have blamed him if he did. But he doesn't run, he does what that angel of the Lord commanded him, he obeys, he trusts, even if he doesn't understand, even if he doesn't have a clue.

Just like Mary, Joseph also says yes.

I remember when my former congregation was sponsoring our first refugee families. They were from Somalia, a group of people from the Mataban region of the country. They were the lowest caste and they were considered untouchable, undesirable. Canada agreed to accept 500 Mataban as refugees and our church sponsored a large, extended family.

The family was to consist of a husband and wife, their 3 children, a grandmother, another adult son, an adult daughter and her young daughter. The adult males were to become breadwinners; the adult women were to go to school while the grandmother looked after the children when they weren't in school. Great theory but in reality, it was nothing close.

The first group to arrive were the grandmother, the married couple and their three children, along with the other adult male. Except we found out once they arrived that the husband and wife had divorced but didn't tell the immigration officers. The wife had remarried in the refugee camp in Kenya and was pregnant with the child of her new husband, who was still in the refugee camp. The husband, Abdi, left the family as soon as he got to Canada and wanted nothing to do with his former wife and family. The other adult male, turned out to have serious mental health issues, suicidal as well as homicidal, and needed medical attention and was unable to work at all. The grandmother had no desire to look after the children and soon became very ill herself. The mother of the three children, Fozia, pregnant with her fourth child, was the hero of the story.

She was strong and resilient and did whatever was necessary to keep things together. But in the end the good news was that Abdi chose to reconcile with Fozia, they remarried and he claimed the fourth child, a little boy named Victor, seriously, as his own and the family has done remarkably well since.

Abdi had a choice to make, Joseph had a choice to make, whether to take Mary as his wife knowing what he knew, knowing how unbelievable his life was going to be, and making that choice, as difficult and unimaginable as it was.

What a start to a marriage! Life can be hard enough as it is. Young people who are about to enter into the holy estate of marriage know the challenges. Love will keep us together, goes the song and we all know that the kind of love the world often talks about, romantic, physical, emotional love, will only take you so far. The love needed is more than that, it's sacrificial, agape love that alone will sustain a marriage. I remember that I once thought that all the weddings I had officiated at ended with... and they all lived happily ever after, until that day when young man called me and said he desperately needed to speak with me.

I remembered that I had officiated at his wedding only about 3 months earlier. He came and said to me, she doesn't want to be married anymore. I wondered whether she didn't want to be married, or married to him, but it came as a shock. Three months in and she wants out? **Life is hard enough without an act of God getting in between the new bride and groom.**

But you know what, this Christmas account, Matthew's account is maybe more honest than the well behaved manger animals and the sanitized birth story of Luke's gospel. And in Matthew's account, once the Magi from the East don't return to Herod to tell him where Jesus is, Herod flies into a murderous rage. Joseph has to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. Jesus was a refugee, like Fozia and Abdi and their children. Life isn't always easy and to love someone means to stick with them when it's not all about the anticipation and build up to the wedding, but when things go haywire and you find yourself on the run. Love

isn't about the **feeling** when you get along, when things are good, love is about the **doing** when things fall apart and you struggle to see the point.

Advent love is about a God who looks upon his creation and sees it gone sideways, badly. It's about a God who doesn't weigh the risk and rewards before he acts, but knows that it's going to take an act of sacrifice, that God will love us despite our inability to love him back, despite our troubling tendency to fail him repeatedly. Advent love is about a God how chooses to enter into the mess we've made of creation and willingly take upon himself our sins so that through him we might find forgiveness and redemption, renewal and restoration. Advent love is about a God who knows that some of us might consider ourselves to be righteous, **but asks for more.** God asks for more because God gave everything in becoming one of us in the child of Bethlehem. **God asks for more, more love than maybe we think we're capable of because he knows that he created us to be capable of more than we think we are.**

There was an article in the Globe and Mail yesterday which was on the front page of the website for a very short time. I think it got taken off the front page of the website because of all the negative comments. There were two types of negative comments. The first was because the article had to do with Christmas and there's plenty of people on the comment boards who think anything religious isn't worth taking up room on the front page of a news website. But the other negative comments were because of the title of the article. It was called, and you will have to forgive me for the language here, Merry Coffee? For Christ's sake!

It was about Starbucks and their new Christmas cups which proclaim, not Merry Christmas, but Merry Coffee. The author of the article is Randy Boyagoda, who is a professor of English at the University of Toronto, where he is also principal of St. Michael's College. He writes, "I don't want a lot for Christmas. There's just one thing I need. All I want for Christmas is ... for British historian Tom Holland to have coffee, at Starbucks, with Kanye West. I am sure they would notice the phrase "Merry Coffee" beribboning their cups and debate whether the coffee chain is affirming Christianity's staying power, sip by sip, or eroding it, drip by drip. I think the case could be made either way. I think the point is to **take notice and decide to make a case.** Our varied and often uncertain experiences of this time of year invite an intentional moment of reckoning with the higher-order origin story of Christmas itself, whether over coffee or in the still dark of a winter night. Otherwise, whether believer or agnostic or atheist, **we risk captivity to indifference and presumption** about what we think and believe and do about Christmas, and likewise about what others think and believe and do about it."¹

I confess, somewhat ashamedly, I don't know as much about Tom Holland the British historian as I do about Kanye West. Holland is a prodigious author and intellect writing about history, religions, dinosaurs and who taught himself Greek and proceeded to translate an 800 page Greek history one paragraph a day until he finished. He also tweets a lot, having sent out over 150,000 tweets by January 2019. Though he says that his morality and ethics are grounded in Christianity, he is an atheist, claiming that he has seen no evidence that would satisfy him that anything supernatural exists. He says that he has seen no proof for God.

¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-merry-coffee-for-christs-sake/>

Now, as for Kanye West, I've listened to his music and if you don't know Kanye West, he is, according to Wikipedia, an American rapper, singer, songwriter, record producer, entrepreneur, and fashion designer. He has sold over 100 million records and has won 21 Grammy Awards. He also happens to be married to Kim Kardashian, the OG of all reality stars. Kanye West also happens to be a practicing Christian. He had an early hit with his song, Jesus Walks, and his latest album is simply called, Jesus is King. If you're at all familiar with Kanye West, you will know that he is a complicated figure.

He's said and done things that make you just shake your head and then he writes songs that make you think completely differently. His religious beliefs have also been hard to pin down, but in 2019 he reaffirmed his Christian faith on Twitter, which is apparently the new confessional. This past October, he said with respect to his past, "When I was trying to serve multiple gods, it drove me crazy" in reference to the god of ego, god of money, god of pride, the god of fame, and that "I didn't even know what it meant to be saved" and that now "I love Jesus Christ. I love Christianity."

Now if you know Kanye, you will take what he says with a grain of salt, or a spoonful. But you can't take anything away from him when he has the guts to say out loud to all the people who pay attention to him, "Look, Jesus died for our sins! It's simple."

It is simple.

Advent love is about a God who is so in love with his creation, with us, that he chose to be born through Mary and her righteous husband Joseph, as a baby, a baby who would grow up to become man who would save his people from their sins.

This is the love that God has for us, that despite how complicated and messed up we've become he chose to love us. He chose to be born among us and to die for our sins so that we would find new life, redeemed life, eternal life.

As Kanye says, **it's simple.**

It's simple, but it's also clear that our situations aren't. Like Kanye West, all of us live complicated lives. We vacillate between our righteousness and our sinfulness. We get it right for a time, then it all comes crashing down. Sometimes we think we're so far gone, but then we see the light, the light that shines in our darkness and we know that we are never too far gone for God, for God's Advent love. It is complicated and we are complex creatures. But the invitation of Christmas is pretty straightforward.

Boyagoda concludes his article with these words, "Between Mr. Holland and Mr. West opens up a spectrum of contact points, dispositions and responses to the question of Christianity's enduring, force field-like presence in late 2019, and certainly in ways that include and go well beyond sifting the meaning of seasonal Starbucks cups. It may be enough, in the days leading up to Christmas, to measure your own position on that spectrum against theirs, and in turn reconfirm whatever sense of the meaning of Christ's birth you've long assumed and maybe stopped thinking, worrying and praying about. But why not take a moment to yourself, stop hate-listening to Mariah Carey **and do something joyful and**

terrifying: reckon afresh with who and what that little baby in Bethlehem was or was not, or still is, or never, or always will be.”

Reckon afresh.

I like that.

Who is this child who is born to a perplexed virgin and who is claimed by a righteous man scared out of his mind by things he couldn't possibly understand? Life is not always simple; our lives are not always simple or straightforward. Matthew's gospel gets it. But in the midst of this complexity and mystery, God comes to Joseph and invites him to move beyond simply his righteousness. God invites him to trust, to obey and to reckon afresh the love of his God. And so it is with us today.

God invites us to trust and to obey, to reckon afresh his love for us, for all creation, in the midst of our complex and complicated lives.

May we move beyond simply being righteous, may we come to trust and obey, even in those things we don't always understand and sometimes scare us silly.

And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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