

Kailua Christian Church (UCC)
Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 18, 2022
“Merry Christmas: His Plans, His Grace”
Scripture: Matthew 1:16-25
Pastor Clive Cowell

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Conception and Birth of Jesus

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MESSAGE:

Merry Christmas! His plans, His grace

Let’s start with a question: “Why should we be merry”? After all, it’s what we say, “Merry Christmas!”

Today’s message is a personal interaction with key figures from the Bible whose lives intersect at the time of Christ’s birth. It’s personal because these stories are meant to affect us; they are meant to help us. These are the stories of Joseph and Mary.

These are the lives of people who were probably very private, but because of a bigger story – the story of Jesus – their lives moved from private to public. We know these people – Mary and Joseph – at least a little. But perhaps there is more to be seen, if we look again. And if we do look again, I think we will find amazing grace.

If we read the nativity stories, we will see something of the challenges Mary and Joseph had to face. How did Joseph deal with the confusion and even thoughts of betrayal he faced? How did Mary come to terms with a life that was one day very simple, but the next was incredibly changed?

Why look at this man and woman? We look at them, because their lives become intimately connected with a babe that lies in a manger; a babe that will Himself have the most incredible story. Through their lives, we will see something more behind the face of Jesus. Their stories – what’s behind their faces – have been capturing hearts for 2,000 years. Their stories are for us.

What is revealed in them is to tell their story, but it's also revealed to help us connect; to find a real connection not just with the past but with the present, with each other.

We shall not make comment about every detail in the nativity stories – though there is so much to observe and see.

If we jump straight into Matthew Chapter 1 we will find we are looking at a genealogy or family history of Jesus that starts with Abraham. Remember that old song,

“Father Abraham had many sons
Many sons had Father Abraham
I am one of them and so are you
So let's just praise the Lord!”

Matthew's first chapter continues on verse after verse, until we get to verse 16.

“Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”. Matthew 1:16

For verse upon verse, we find many fathers. But Joseph, who finally gets mentioned – oh, he is described as a husband but not as a father. Husbands and fathers are important relationships, aren't they?

We might take a moment here and think about how Joseph felt about that – being a husband but not yet a father. Would he have had hopes of being a father? Most likely, especially with such a family tree.

Let's go a little deeper.

We might compare Joseph with one of the earliest in the family line, that of Abraham. Let's spend a little time on this. What might the connection be there? Well, for years, Abraham had no children himself. In fact, it wasn't until he was 86 that he had his first child, Ishmael. 86!!! Can you imagine? Changing diapers, and times of feeding at that ripe old age.

Let's go a little deeper...

Let's remember some background about Abraham. His name in his early days was actually 'Abram'. It's meaning? 'Exalted Father'. How grand! Then later, when God called him, he was given a new name, that of 'Abraham', and this new name took things to a whole new level: he would be 'Father of Many'. So not just exalted father, but father of many. But there's an obvious problem, I hope you can see. He doesn't actually have any children yet.

So, here was Abram, now named Abraham, a man who had to walk around with the title of 'exalted father' – though with no children – and then God gives him an even bigger name of 'father of many' – and still no children whatsoever. We might be forgiven for thinking that on hearing of the new name God gave him that Abram replied to God... “Gee, thanks God. Hard enough for my first name, and now this?”

What must that have been like for Abram/Abraham? Was he ridiculed? Did people whisper: “Here comes the father with no children?” Did he go through moments of doubt? We can only conjecture, right?

Perhaps more importantly, could Abraham have imagined in any way whatsoever that he really would be a father, and more than that, a father of multitudes? What hope did he have – living

in his eighties – that he would ever have a child? How about you? Are you 80 or so? What would it feel like to be in Abraham’s situation? Interesting, right?

Now consider Joseph. Here is this private man, a man from a long line of renowned men. Like Abram, he too is yet without a child. And, similarly, life is going to drastically change for him as well. His name also speaks of promise. The meaning of Joseph’s name? “He will add.” Abraham and Joseph... they are similar aren’t they?

So then, “what’s in a name?” Well, clearly a lot!

Joseph is a man without a child, though his name kind of intimates he would have one. He may have hoped that one day he, too, would be described in family discussions as the father of a new generation like all his fathers before him. He may have imagined being a proud father. He might have dreamed of sitting his own child on his father (Jacob’s) lap. But God had a different plan for Joseph. And, when you think about it, the plan for Joseph was grander than the plan even for Abraham. Joseph would be given the privilege to raise the living Messiah himself. Joseph would be given the privilege to see his child – this babe – grow into boyhood, to oversee his education; even to apprentice him. Alongside Mary, Joseph would have a view closer than anyone else... of the Son of God! Isn’t that amazing! It surely is!

So, how then did the birth of Jesus come about? We find the answer beginning in Matthew 1:18. And, when we read this passage we will find something so amazing it might beggar belief!

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:18!

Joseph is NOT the father!

Let’s consider some background.

Mary is pledged to be married to Joseph and, in this culture, it is a formal engagement – they were considered husband and wife; though no consummation of the marriage had yet occurred; though they had not yet lived together. In their culture, once you had made such a pledge (to be betrothed), it was no easy matter to withdraw and free yourself from the arrangement. It was as if they were legally and bindingly married.

Startlingly, we learn that Mary is pregnant! But, (bombshell) the father is not Joseph!! Which, on its own would be astonishing enough, but then we see that she is given a child from the Holy Spirit!!! And, just to add one further layer, as much as we can understand, Mary has probably been pregnant for three months (if we investigate the nativity passages of Luke)!!!! And... if that wasn’t enough, let’s read the following Scripture:

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” Luke 1:39-40

Let’s recap. Joseph comes from a long line of fathers. And they are amazing fathers. Honored and revered! Joseph meets a girl, Mary. Everything is looking rosy. He is pledged to be married. His dreams of adding to the great family tree see destined to be fulfilled and he could put a child on his own father’s lap.

But... then one day... suddenly Mary “had” to take a journey. And there’s no intimation that she told Joseph why.

Remember? In the nativity stories, Mary is visited by an angel who gives her the news that she will be with child and give birth to a son and she is to give him the name of Jesus. “How will this be?” she asks, “since I am a virgin?” And the angel tells her how the Holy Spirit will bring her the child noting: “for nothing is impossible with God.”

And with that the angel leaves and the Scripture then tells us that Mary got ready and hurried to take this important journey.

Can you imagine being Joseph? Perhaps he had the following thoughts: Why did she have to leave home and travel all the way to some hill town in the country of Judea? Why did she have to go “in haste”? What must have gone through Joseph’s mind? And then, of course, at some point, Mary had to return and (given the passage of time) her pregnancy was now no longer invisible!!!! On her return, unless she was incredibly good at camouflage, Joseph would have known Mary was pregnant.

“Pregnant?” “Mary?” “Who does she know in Judea?”

“But, but, but... this is Mary... I know her! Don’t I?”

You know, we all read the Bible, we read the Scriptures. Perhaps we might sometimes feel we have a handle on things biblical. We might even say we know what’s what and while God might surprise us once in a while, things will pretty much be like they always are.

Joseph and Mary – they would have read their Scriptures too. Maybe even more than us. They would have read about the Holy Spirit even. Could they have known that it would be the Holy Spirit that would be the One to bring a child to save man and bring peace on earth; could they have known when the Holy Spirit would bring such a child; and, could they have known that the Holy Spirit would be the One to bring them a child? Surely, Mary and Joseph’s initial reactions in the nativity stories were reactions of surprise.

There are many ways that things can happen in life. They can happen by accident, they can happen by endeavor, they can happen even by our own plans – but none of these compare to the plans of God and what He can do; absolutely, nothing! For nothing is impossible with God. God’s plans far exceedingly outweigh, outstretch and supersede anything we can or could imagine. This can fill us with marvel and wonder when things are going well for us. We can reflect and express the thought “oh, thank you, Lord your plans are surely wonderful”. At the same time, His plans can fill us with assurance and hope when things are not so well. “Thank you, Lord, for being there; thank you, Lord, for plans that will safeguard and protect me.”

As for Joseph, he was caught in the crossfire of doubts and anxieties. Things were not so well. “Pregnant?” “Mary?” “Who does she know in Judea?” “But, but, but, this is Mary... I know her! Don’t I?”

Joseph found himself in the midst of turmoil. Perhaps, you’ve found yourself in turmoil, too? Such situations bring more questions than answers. For Joseph, there were questions about Mary, questions about her going to Judea, questions about her becoming pregnant, questions about the marriage. Did Joseph turn to Scripture for guidance? Did he go to his Rabbi? Did he speak with friends, with family? Did he isolate himself? Did he bury himself in work hoping it would all go away? Where do you turn in times like this? How do you respond?

We have some insights into the heart and mind of Joseph in the midst of all this turmoil. Let’s look again at what the Scripture says, and keep in mind all the context we can muster as we attempt to find some clarity regarding his situation; giving us the benefits of seeing how others go through difficulties; giving us the insight of seeing more of this man Joseph.

“And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.” Mathew 1:19.

We can see that Joseph has his own plans. We can see that Joseph has come to a conclusion; namely, that he is going to dismiss Mary – or, put another way, he is going to divorce her.

We should note two things. First that Joseph was a righteous man. Second, (if you recall) he was a man who came from the line of David, and from Abraham – pillars in the faith of Israel. Joseph was a man who was brought up in the traditions of Israel. He would have been brought up learning the commandments of God. So, to call him a righteous man, it says something very specific about him. It’s saying that as a righteous man, he was someone who believed in the God of Israel. Joseph was a man who knew what it meant to be a follower of God.

Can you see the tension that exists in those words of Matthew 1:19... “he was a righteous man... [about] ... to divorce”. Given all the issues, and especially that Joseph didn’t even see this situation coming, what pain do you think Joseph was going through? How easy do you think it was for him to contemplate divorce? Probably not easy at all.

If you’ve been through a relationship break up, even struggling now, perhaps you can identify, even in part, how torn on the inside Joseph must have felt. His life had changed dramatically. Hopes and dreams were shattered. What was promised in betrothal had seemingly gone. Anguish and deep dilemma flooded his heart and mind. Painful decisions had to be made. The one he loved... was to be put away. The smear of scandal stained his forward steps. Was there any future at all? Would he even have a child? Would he ever see his child on his own father’s knee? How long would this pain take? This was the cruel circumstance he no doubt felt he was in. Most likely, he felt betrayed. And, in all of this, what Mary was telling him probably made absolutely no sense at all. How difficult life can be sometimes. Really difficult.

If the story ended there, we would have a poor message to share. But, because Joseph is a righteous man, there is apparent in his life (a characteristic of his life), a deep self-control over his emotions and over his actions. There is no evidence of an ugly scene, no story of lashing out, no acrimonious mess. No, Joseph is a righteous man. There is absolutely no suggestion that Joseph says to God, “let me put my righteousness aside for 5 minutes, and let me just vent my anger, my rage, my hurt.” No, not at all! In all of this disarray, Joseph has an allegiance to God and to God’s Word. And so, while there is an internal battle going on in Joseph’s life, the text, in a very matter of fact way, simply states that Joseph didn’t want to expose Mary publicly.

If you go to certain cultures around the world, women are shunned, women are thrown into jail, women are even stoned in such situations. But Joseph is a righteous man. Mary could have been shunned, Mary could have been thrown into jail, Mary could have been stoned. And so, while the law of Moses regarding divorce was given to preserve this people so that there would be a sense of true community; while the law was given so that this people would be different from all other peoples who did not know God; while the law was given so that there would be a purity about everything they did, which was to filter down into all of their relationships, Joseph, a righteous man extends grace.

Joseph extends grace because he knows his God – and his God, our God, is a God of grace. Joseph encounters God, who tells him, “Do not be afraid.” And then God gives him the plans: he should not divorce, instead he should marry as planned; that Mary will have a Child, a Son and Joseph will get to call the child Jesus for He will save people from their sins. And Joseph did all this. He feared not. He listened to God. God provided Joseph incredible grace. And who is to say that Jesus did not sit upon Joseph’s own fathers lap of Jacob?

We may get caught up in situations, we may have our own doubts and questions, but remember: God has a plan for us. And, He wants us to know His plans. His words of Scripture provide us content, direction, hope. Why because God is a God of grace.

There are so many things that we have yet to learn about God and about His plans. Has God shared His grace with you? Whether you know it or not – His grace has been shed abundantly.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. Eph. 1:7.

His grace is sufficient for you, it's sufficient for me. God wills that all be saved. That's His grace. God's grace is not just extended to us at salvation, but for every part of life. "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Grace is available to us for every challenge and trial and temptation we face. Just as it was to Joseph. There is no possibility of the supply being exhausted. There is no danger of going to God for help only to find that He is no longer willing to provide for us. God's plans can and often will surprise us. Why? We have overflowing abundant grace from God.

His grace though we are sinners is pleasant for sure, sweet indeed, delightful... definitely.

But more than pleasant, sweet and delightful, His grace, once we know it, elicits within us deep joy. And that's the meaning of merry.

His grace... that's the reason why we should be merry.

Merry Christmas!

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