

## “Love”

Matthew 1:18-25  
December 23, 2007

So far in Advent, we have heard how the promises of God are the substance of our hope, how the peace of God is revealed in the coming of the Messiah, how the joy of the Lord is bigger than any crisis we can face. Today, we look at the way God’s love surprises us.

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Sometimes a story is so familiar, we stop hearing the surprises within it. This morning, we are going to look at the surprising way God’s love is revealed in the time leading up to Jesus’ birth.

### **Mary and Joseph (the personal cost of God’s love)**

First, let’s look at Mary and Joseph. We have covered this before, but it is worth covering again. You probably know that a betrothal was more than simply an “engagement.” The marriage between a man and a woman was a significantly more involved process in those days than it is today.

The first step was the contracting between families. There was generally a price set for the bride; and that price would be fairly steep. It was to recognize the value lost to the bride’s family and, in a more pragmatic sense, a way to help offset the costs of the week-long marriage ceremony that would come at the end of the betrothal period.

Most betrothal periods lasted a full year. The time frame was designed as a testing period; as an opportunity for any hidden flaws to be disclosed. Most times, the man and woman were still kept separate, even though they would be described as husband and wife. If, during the course of that year, infidelity *was* discovered – say, by the woman manifesting a pregnancy – it would be considered adultery and the marriage would be dissolved.

Again, we need to stop thinking about the end of the story. Mary’s pregnancy is more akin to an episode of Extreme Home Makeover, where they tear down someone’s house and build a brand new, spectacular version – except in this one, when the crowd says, “Driver, move that bus!” the bus pulls away, Joseph sees that he is being presented with a house someone else is already living in. What he thought was his was not. He was upset, angry, disappointed, hurt, frustrated, and bewildered. I think he probably would have turned on Ty Pennington in a second and said, “Bring back the bus.”

Here’s the thing: the marriage *would be* dissolved. Not *might be*, not *could be*, not *should be*. It would be. Infidelity was a deal breaker. It was an irreparable breach of the contract and a shameful thing.

Joseph and Mary’s family were all aware of the standard set in Deuteronomy 22, “If...evidence of the young woman’s virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she

committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

My, how things have changed! Now, if you happen to be sixteen years old and famous, you get to make your confession of your unwed, underage pregnancy on the front cover of OK magazine (how ironic is that?) and paid \$1 million for pictures. These days, we ask *if* Jamie Lynn Spears should *still* be a role model. (I'll be you didn't come here today expecting to hear Mary compared to Jamie Lynn Spears, did you? Another little Christmas surprise!)

In fairness, even by the time of Joseph and Mary, stoning was a much less frequent result. It still existed – as evidenced later by the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Ordinarily, there were two non-lethal options: public disgrace or a private divorce. The public disgrace is exactly as it sounds: the aggrieved party would go to the elders in the town, proclaim his complaint, and then there would be severe condemnation of the young woman and her family. The private divorce involved only the families and two independent witnesses and some paperwork.

We do not know if anyone told Joseph that she claimed the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit – it did not matter. Even with the relaxed punishments, it was clear that a righteous man before God could not take home a woman of disgrace.

That said, Matthew's account makes it clear that Joseph cared about Mary. He was not happy about this turn of circumstances, nor was he relieved that he did not have to go through with the wedding. The end of their relationship may not have been in doubt, but Joseph takes time to consider the options. The sense is that Joseph was looking for a way to be kind to Mary. Note here that Scripture tells us that the dream of the angel came "just as he had resolved to do this..."

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. Because we have heard the story so many times, we know that Joseph believed the angel and acted accordingly. But seriously, if it had been you or me, would that have been a simple decision? Vivid or not, I think I would have had some serious doubts about going forward with the plan based upon something I saw in a dream. It took a huge step of faith to stand by Mary and say, "Yes, this child is from the Holy Spirit." Can you hear those words coming out of your mouth?

What is so surprising in this story about God's love is that it is so personally costly. Mary knew the cost when she was going to be pregnant during the betrothal period. Joseph realized the cost as he made the decision to stand by her.

That God's love is personally costly surprises us. We expect it to be like ice cream: smooth, easy, pleasing. There's a sense that when God shows up, it is like Superman coming to the rescue: all of a sudden we can stand back, exhale and stop holding our breath, and watch the hero make everything turn out all right. But Scripture seems to show that God's love works differently than our movie-superhero expectation.

Also, please hear this clearly: we cannot buy, we cannot earn, we cannot in any way demand God's grace and love – it is grace, a gift. However, the changes brought by receiving that gift are huge. It changes everything.

Joseph and Mary's participation in God's plan was not a simple, "Ok, LORD. That's great, go get 'em." It involved them taking huge steps of faith. There was the initial step of faith – of obedience. They were blessed with the child. Then came the many other steps of faith: as any parent knows, the expression of God's love in raising a child comes at a high personal cost.

From my own perspective, the blessing that has come from being a parent has been greater than I could have ever imagined. There are times I reflect on my life and wonder what hit, what happened? I live in a house of girls. Guys will understand this: I have yet to figure out when the bathrooms in my house turned into chemistry labs with bottles and potions and creams and tools ...I have gained enough experience to know not to ask. I think I must spend a good portion of my life with an exasperated or confused look on my face; but here's the truth: I am so grateful to God for the blessing of being a part of the family God has given me. Whatever it cost me to be a part of this family was not worth having in the first place.

And so it is with Joseph and Mary. Whatever they gave up – and they certainly gave up security, respectability, and a normal life – was not worth having in light of the gift that they received.

God's love was totally transformative in their lives, personally. How surprising!

### **Ruth and Boaz (the societally transforming love of God)**

If you still have your Bibles open to Matthew 1, you will notice that the gospel does not begin with the birth of Jesus. It begins with a lineage of Jesus' ancestry. Take a look at the genealogy Matthew provides. You will see that it is paragraphed into three sections: the first section is the Patriarchs, the second section is the Kings, and the third section is from the time of exile.

If you want to tie a group of scholars in knots, ask them what the genealogy means.

However, for our purposes this morning, I want you to notice something unusual that Matthew has included: the names of four women. The four women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah" (aka Bathsheeba). Here's a review of their backgrounds:

- We find Tamar in Genesis 38. To make a long story short, Judah had arranged for his eldest son Er to marry her. They did, Er died without producing any children. According to the law of the time, Judah sent his next eldest son to her to produce an heir. He refused and died. Afraid his last son would suffer the same fate, Judah sent Tamar to her father's house to wait for his next eldest son to grow up. She went. Some time later, Judah went to town to shear sheep. Tamar dressed up like a prostitute, seduced Judah, and got him to give her a signet ring and other stuff. Later, he tried to retrieve the heirlooms from the prostitute by trading one of his sheep, but could not find her. Three months later, Judah gets a report that Tamar is pregnant and he ordered her to be burned. At that point, she shows him the stuff and he is chagrined – and stuck. Tough girl. Yet God used her to continue the promise he made to Abraham.

- Rahab is a little more familiar to Sunday School veterans. We read about her in the early part of the book of Joshua. She was a prostitute in Jericho who harbored Israel's spies as they were entering the Promised Land. When the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, Rahab and her family were preserved and became a part of the people of Israel. She was instrumental in God's plan to deliver the Promised land to Israel.
- Ruth is the "Ruth" of the Old Testament book that follows Judges. She was a Moabite woman. The people of Moab were considered enemies of Israel for things that happened during the Exodus. Ruth became well known because of her faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi, and to Naomi's God. Ruth's husband had died (as had Naomi's) and Naomi encouraged Ruth to return to her father's house. Instead, Ruth stayed with Naomi. The climax of the story is when the hero of the story, Boaz, who had no obligation to her was willing to become her "kinsman-redeemer," takes them on and marries Ruth. Ruth, a Moabite woman, is David's grandmother.
- Bathsheeba's story is well-known. We meet her in 2 Samuel 11. She was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, a soldier in the army of King David. From the King's quarters, he saw her bathing and lusted after her. He called her in and lay with her. She conceived. David, troubled by the news, tried to cover his tracks by having Uriah given leave from military service to come home for a little R & R. Uriah would not go in the house while others were in the field, so there was no way for Bathsheeba's pregnancy to be covered up. David had Uriah killed. The child was born and died; later, David and Bathsheeba had a second child who would become King Solomon.

God is not bound by our cultural expectations of using only socially or religiously approved people. God often moves forward through the lives of people who are powerless, who have no voice, or whose backgrounds are not pristine. (By the way, the men on the list are not any more virtuous – it is just that the inclusion of the women in this list is so out of the ordinary that we see how Matthew is making the point.)

And, even as God is not bound by our cultural expectations of using only socially or religiously approved people, he transforms the lives of those who had been previously lost, lonely, desperate, or hopeless.

Do you ever feel like you are not good enough for God to engage? Is there something in your past, is there something about you that you think God would not be interested in you? The genealogy of Jesus tells us very differently. There is no one outside the reach of God's love: not by status, not by heritage, not by past personal history, not by wealth, not by geography, not by gender, not by anything. Where can we go to escape from God? Where can we go to escape His presence and love? If we go to heaven, He is there; if we make our bed in Hell, He is there, too. If we settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there His hand leads us. If we say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to Him, the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to Him.

Each one of these women – and, I believe, each one of us – experienced the real life pains of loneliness, separation, hurt, and wondering whether God was able to love them. The answer, they discovered, was yes. Yes, God did love them.

What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that nether death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Despite – or because of – a very imperfect and even sinful heritage, God sent his only begotten Son. God’s love is able to reach everyone: including you and me. God’s love is surprising in its scope and power.

### **Conclusion**

Friends, as we look at this Christmas story and the birth of Jesus, we need to realize how God’s love impacts real lives: there was a very personal cost to Joseph and Mary. Everything changed. As we remember and reflect on it, we can see how it was worth the cost, but cannot forget that it changed everything for them.

But the truth of God’s love is this, too: there was a very personal cost to God – the only begotten Son born to save men from their sins. He changed everything. There was an incredible impact on the understanding of how things work, this simple baby born in an out-of-the-way-place and in humble circumstances was not only King of the Jews, but King of kings and LORD of lords. God’s eternal love revealed to us: through time, for all time, but in time for you and for me.

God’s love still surprises us. Are you willing to be surprised this Christmas?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering

10:00 offering