

**Wesley United Methodist Church  
December 20, 2020**

**Deck the Halls: Decorating Your Life with What Matters<sup>i</sup>**

**“Deck the Halls With Love”**

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

In just a few days it will be Christmas. Our time of preparation is almost over and has certainly been different this year. But today, we come to spend some time with Joseph who also found himself thrown into a whirlwind of changes and a time of uncertainty. He was planning a big life change. He and Mary were engaged to be married but then he found out that she was pregnant – and he knew that he was not the father.

What was he to do? I’m sure he felt betrayed, probably angry, and undoubtedly a whole range of emotions. Matthew doesn’t tell us how Joseph found out about the pregnancy. What we do know is that Joseph had some important decisions to make. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, the laws regarding marriage were very different than they are today, and the law allowed Joseph to expose Mary’s infidelity and have her stoned to death as an adulteress.

We don’t know much about Joseph. He only appears in Matthew and Luke in the stories of Jesus’ birth and by implication in the one story of Jesus’ childhood. But this story from Matthew tells us all we really need to know. Matthew tells us directly that Joseph was a righteous man and that he did not want to have Mary killed or even publicly humiliated so he decided that he would divorce her quietly. After Joseph had made the decision to deal gently with Mary and not to condemn her or shame her, only then did an angel appear in a dream to Joseph and tell him the rest of the story. Joseph was a man who followed the law, but he valued relationships over rules and love over law.

In this story we get to see a fresh look at how God is revealed to us in unexpected places and through unexpected people. We get to see God’s radical intrusion into the lives of ordinary people. Mary and Joseph were not royalty. They

weren't people of authority or great influence. They were common ordinary people simply going about their lives until God intruded and started something new.

I don't believe that God is a great puppeteer forcing people to do certain things, so I believe that Mary could have said no to the angel who appeared to her. Instead, she responded out of courage and love for God and for humanity when she told the angel that she would bear this child. Similarly, Joseph could have had Mary stoned. He could have had her put away quietly as he planned, but after an angel appeared to him, after the angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, he showed what he was made of, he agreed to go forward with the marriage.

He named the baby Jesus, meaning deliverance or salvation as the angel told him to do. In doing this, he formally adopted him and claimed him as his own child with all the rights of inheritance that went with it. In doing this he made Jesus a legal descendent in the line of King David, fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David.

Joseph lived his life showing compassion, kindness, caring, and most of all love above any other consideration. If we think about what a child learns about behavior and relationships and life from his or her parents and other adults in their lives, we can imagine that Jesus learned early on about the importance of relationships and about the value of love overriding any other consideration.

There's another important message from the angel here in Joseph's dream. The angel says that the child will be called Emmanuel which means "God with us." This would have been a powerful assurance to Joseph – in the middle of this crazy situation, he had the promise that God was with him, that God actually participates in the human condition, and that he would not be left alone to deal with this.

Notice that agreeing to cooperate with God does not, in any way, mean that life is going to be easy and smooth. It will still have difficulties but we will not be left to deal with them alone. That is shown quickly, when as the story unfolds, Joseph receives and responds to three more dreams warning him of where to go and what to do to keep both Mary and Jesus safe from those who would try to kill him. There were dangers, but he was not alone trying to figure out what to do.

God loved us so much that God entered the world as a human being and experienced what we experience as humans. Try to wrap your head around this for a minute. As Adam Hamilton puts it, “God stands outside and beyond our universe, but at the same time, God’s presence permeates it all. God animates the cosmos, sustains it, and holds it together.”<sup>iii</sup> “There is something profoundly moving about God actually knowing what we are experiencing as humans.”

Later in our service we will hear the words of Christina Rossetti who in 1885 wrote, “Love came down at Christmas. Love all lovely, Love divine, Love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign.”<sup>iii</sup> We proclaim at Christmas that God entered our world as a baby to show us how much we are loved.

One of the things about love is that love does not force itself upon anyone. Love does not coerce. Love allows space and freedom for love to be accepted. That’s what God did and does. God does not force us to accept this gift of love. That is a decision that is entirely up to us. God is willing to endure the pain of being rejected so that our acceptance of God’s love is just that – our acceptance, free and uncoerced.

Hamilton tells about a young man who asked him “If there really is a God, why doesn’t he just show himself to us?” Hamilton talked about how big the universe was, and about how Moses had once said to God, “show me your glory.” In essence God replied that Moses could not survive that experience. Hamilton recalled a solar eclipse that we had a few years ago and about how we all wanted to see it, but were given warnings not to look directly at the sun. Our sun is the center of only one of somewhere between 200 billion and two trillion galaxies each containing billions of stars.

Hamilton’s answer to the young man was that God actually did what he had asked and “what Moses asked and what every thoughtful human being has asked – God did come to show Godself to us in a way we could see. God came to us in Jesus.”<sup>iv</sup> Hamilton said, “I see God through the world that God has made, ... but I see God most clearly when I look at Jesus. When I picture what God is like – God’s character, love, mercy, and grace – I see Jesus. I see him loving broken people, eating with sinners and tax collectors. I see him healing the sick and restoring vision to those who were blind. I see him touching the lepers who were treated as untouchables and

restoring them to the community by healing their affliction.” He went on to give other examples and concluded by saying, “When I pray, I pray to the God who showed me what God is like, thanks to all the ways that Jesus revealed God’s heart. This is what Emmanuel means to me.”<sup>v</sup>

Matthew’s gospel begins with the promise to Joseph that Jesus is “God with us – Emmanuel.” It ends with Jesus giving that same promise. When Jesus was leaving his disciples he said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” You see, the important thing here is not just that Jesus came to us as Emmanuel about 2000 years ago, but that Jesus continues to be with us and is still Emmanuel with each and every one of us.

Because God is with us, we do not need to be afraid. That’s really important to us right now. Between the pandemic and everything else happening in our country and our world, we live in a time when fear is almost palpable. The people in the Bible also lived in times of great fear. More than 100 times in the Bible an angel appears to someone with the words, “Do not be afraid.” We don’t need to be afraid because God is with us. With you and with me.

This is the great love with which we are invited to live and to decorate our lives. Once we have received this love, it makes a difference in how we live and we are then called to share that love with everyone around us and most especially with those who do not yet know this love.

The other morning, I was watching a video on You Tube of Hugh Bonneville at a program with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. He was talking about the song, “It is well with my soul” written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. I knew part of the story of this song, but I didn’t know the rest. Horatio and his wife Anna were well known in their church and community for helping other people. I knew that his business had been mostly destroyed during the great Chicago fire and that two years later Anna had set sail for England with their four daughters for a vacation. He was to join them later.

During the trip their ship was hit by another ship and sank within 12 minutes. All four children died in that tragedy. He told a friend, “There is just one thing that is magnificently clear, I must not lose faith.” When Horatio set sail for England to meet his wife, the ship’s captain pointed out to him where the ship had gone down. During that journey, he penned the first words to the now famous song. “When peace like a river

attendeth my soul, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'" He proclaimed that our external circumstances do not affect the internal nature of our soul. This was the part of the story that I knew. But it continues.

In no way was he minimizing the tragedy or grief of what had happened. But during all of it, he knew that God was with him and would somehow help him to face whatever happened. Anna and Horatio returned to the states and Anna gave birth to a son. That son died of scarlet fever before he was four years old. Two more daughters were born to the family.

In 1881, the family moved to Jerusalem where they were involved in working with people of all backgrounds relieving the effects of poverty, disease, and strife. Seven years later Horatio died, and Anna found strength to turn outward, move forward and continue their work. In time their daughter Bertha expanded their work rescuing those who had experienced the shipwrecks of life. During World War 1, she organized soup kitchens for refugees, oversaw hospitals for soldiers on all sides of the conflict and took in orphan children.

Today, the Spafford Children's Center in East Jerusalem continues to care for children and aims to bring healing, hope, and prosperity to Palestinian children and their families in East Jerusalem.

Hugh Bonneville in telling this story concluded by saying that this is an echo of Christmas. "Because of Jesus, the human spirit can rise above tragedy, whenever, wherever we suffer our own night of sorrow. God's light does shine in the darkness, hope can heal the wounded soul and the Christmas work of giving, of loving of serving, and rescuing is ours if we choose to make it so, and as we do, we join with saints and angels to rejoice and sing, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'" <sup>vi</sup>

There are many ways that each of us as individuals and as a congregation continue the work of giving, loving, serving, and rescuing. Let us continue to do so in this season of love and beyond.

Let us pray:

O God of love, Jesus came to be with us, to live among us, to be Emmanuel, God with us, so that we could see and understand a little bit about who you

are, what you are like, and how you call us to be like Jesus by sharing that love with our hurting world. Move among us and in us and help us to truly be examples of your love to those we meet. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This Series is based on a series from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey, prepared for this season during a pandemic. Some material is mine, but some ideas also come from this resource abbreviated as GNJ. Other resources influencing and quoted are Adam Hamilton's book Incarnation and General Board of Discipleship Advent Resource Year B "Company's Coming". At times it can be difficult to know exactly which source is influential.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamilton, Adam. Incarnation, Location 890.

<sup>iii</sup> Rossetti, Christina. "Love Came Down at Christmas", 1885, UMH #242

<sup>iv</sup> Hamilton, Loc 885 – 903. Note, that I have changed the quote from Hamilton to say "God" and "Godself" rather than "he" and "himself".

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, location 905-913

<sup>vi</sup> Bonneville, Hugu in a You Tube Video [It is Well with My Soul - Hugh Bonneville Christmas Concert Narration - Bing video](#)