

Fourth Sunday in Advent

A MATTER OF HEART

Matthew 1:18-25

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

18Now the birth of Jesus the messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the Prophet. 23"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

DIAGNOSIS: Distanced from God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis – A Soft Heart

Matthew tells us that Joseph is a "righteous" man—a man with a soft heart. When Mary is found to be pregnant, and obviously not by him, he knows his rights. He can expose her as an adulteress

and divorce her. But he is soft hearted and plans instead to do (what is still) the “right” thing quietly, by just dismissing her with no public fuss (v. 19). Nice guy we think, so soft-hearted. Sometimes (perhaps in our better moments) we act like Joseph, showing magnanimity towards those who wrong us. And our magnanimity makes us look good.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis – *A Hard Heart*

But Joseph’s soft-heartedness is not straight out-and-out mercy, it’s more like “quasi” mercy. Remember, Joseph is a “righteous man,” meaning, he is faithful to the Law. The Law is that *modus operandi* concerned with justice; it has no room for mercy. Notice that it never occurs to Joseph to completely forgive Mary and follow through with the marriage. Why? The angel diagnoses his problem as fear. (“Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife,” v. 20.) Why fear? Could it be fear that Mary’s unrighteousness (sinfulness) might reflect poorly on him, a “righteous” man? After all, according to the Law’s *modus operandi*, guilt by association makes one a sinner.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis – *A Failure of Heart*

Joseph acts from the conviction that God’s primary concern is justice. The Law needs to be obeyed, so he (and we) conduct our lives in strict adherence to it. Yet, we know that according to the *modus operandi* of the Law, people get what they deserve. Mary, as a (supposed) sinner, deserved separation (divorce) from Joseph as a result of her (supposed) sin. (And that reading of the Law is lenient! She could have been stoned!) Likewise, God guarantees that sinners will get what they deserve. The Scriptures calls that rightful come-uppance death: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek 18:4). Another word for death is separation from God (the source of life)-or call it eternal divorce, or hell. The point is, all sinners understand (because of the *modus operandi* under which we operate) that death is what sinners have coming to them.

PROGNOSIS: God With Us-Emmanuel!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis – *A Divine Tender-Heart*

But Matthew proclaims the great good news (gospel) about the Divine heart tender enough to turn the world (of the Law) upside down. With Christ's birth, we witness God choosing not to follow through with sinners according to the *modus operandi* of the Law, but rather to operate according to mercy. The result is that rather than separating Himself from sinners (what sinners deserve), God chooses to identify completely with them. He becomes Emmanuel, "God with us" (v. 23). How? Matthew explains: First God takes on human flesh and blood, as we hear in this infancy narrative, and second (even more stunning) God identifies so completely with sinners that he allows all their sin to rub off onto him. He takes that sin willingly and suffers its consequences (being separated from God) on the cross. All this the angel summarizes as she assures Joseph: "She [Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). This is the extent of God's tender-heartedness!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis – *A Change of Heart*

Gabriel's assurances were all Joseph needed for his change of heart. Perhaps already he grasped that God's mercy was on the move with the birth of this child; perhaps he caught on that God was here, already, treating him mercifully too. Something happens in sinners hearts when they (we) hear of this astonishing mercy. They're changed. Just hearing the offer of mercy (an offer too good to refuse!) makes us eager recipients. But accepting it switches us from operating with each other according to the *modus operandi* of the Law to operating according to mercy.

Step 6: Final Prognosis – *A Merciful Heart*

Joseph's change of heart resulted in him taking Mary as his

wife, abstaining from marital relations with her until she gave birth, and then naming the baby (vv. 24-25). By doing so, Joseph gave legitimacy to both Jesus and Mary, covering the (perceived) sin with his own act of mercy. His merciful actions mimic the Divine and tender heart has set in motion. Sinners (we) today are likewise freed up (from the modus operandi of the Law) to be God's mercy-dispensers to each other. In fact, we too can be so bold as to identify completely with sinners even to the point that their sins get rubbed off onto us as well. This we can do gladly, even audaciously, knowing we have one big ace-in-the-hole to handle all that unrighteousness. That ace-in-the-hole, as Matthew tells us and now we get to proclaim, is Jesus: Emmanuel, God-with-us, the one who saves people from their sins. So how about we throw a birthday bash and call it Christmas?