

Fourth Sunday in Advent

GETTING WITH THE PLAN

Matthew 1:18-25

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Analysis by Chris Repp

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.

In contrast to Luke's gospel, the nativity account in Matthew is decidedly from Joseph's point of view. We learn nothing from Matthew about how Mary feels about her unexpected pregnancy. (No Annunciation here, no Visitation, no Magnificat.) Joseph is the protagonist, and in some sense a stand-in for us.

DIAGNOSIS: With Child

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Pregnant (Unplanned!)*

Joseph has a plan (or perhaps it was his and Mary's parents' plan). The plan is for him to take Mary as his wife. Then the inconceivable happens. His betrothed turns out to be pregnant, and the child is not his. His plan is undone.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Afraid (On to Plan B)*

Joseph is a righteous man (v. 19) and doesn't want to make Mary's shame (and his own?) any worse than it already is by exposing her to public disgrace. But certainly there would be no question of a righteous man taking as his wife a woman pregnant with another's child. It would be unthinkable. It is only in this sense that Joseph is "afraid to take Mary as his wife." He's not really fearful, because he already has plans to "dismiss her".

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God is the Father ("The best laid plans of mice and men...")*

But Joseph's problem is not so easily solved. And his righteousness is put to the test when he finds out that the one who has thrown his plans into turmoil is not Mary, but God. As it turns out, it is not Mary's unfaithfulness but God's faithfulness that has caused his problem. And so Joseph's righteous problem-solving – his attempt to eclipse God's righteousness with his own – has only served to make things worse: he now has a problem not only with his betrothed, but also with God. (And God has a problem with him.)

PROGNOSIS: With God (God-with-us)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God is the Son (It's been the plan for some time.)*

The child has not been conceived in sin, but conceived (by the Holy Spirit) because of sin. God's faithful plan goes far beyond the sign given to King Ahaz in the face of his enemies (the child named "God is with us" (Isa. 7:14). It is now made even more full in this child (who is "God with us,") who will save his people from their sins. God, not Joseph, is the righteous problem-solver. But Joseph gets to play a part in this new plan. He gets to name the child "Jesus," a name that is also a confession of faith: "God (YHWH) is Salvation."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fearless ("Back to Plan A, sort of.")*

"Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded" (v. 24). The imperative in the angel's speech is "do not be afraid..." (v. 20). The angel's words, it seems, effect what they command (more Holy Spirit at work, see The Augsburg Confession, Article V). Now unafraid, Joseph is able to consider what was previously unthinkable. His righteousness has taken a back seat to God's.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Married ("On board"—if not "in bed"—with God's plan.)*

Joseph now becomes the caretaker of God's plan. He takes Mary as his wife, and claims Jesus as his own by naming him. God's plan (along with God's righteousness) has become his own. And Joseph will continue to live by this plan until he disappears from Matthew's account. Like John the Baptist in John's Gospel (3:30), Joseph decreases as Jesus increases.