

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every three years we get to hear the two Christmas stories of the Bible back-to-back. Every year on Christmas Eve we hear Luke's version. That's the one that has the trip down to Bethlehem for the census, the newborn Jesus in the manger, and the angels and the shepherds. But there is another story, the one found in Matthew's Gospel. And since we have just begun the year of Matthew in our liturgical calendar, that's the one we get today. Luke's story is mostly about Mary. Matthew's is mostly about Joseph. But both of these stories are part of a larger biblical story of God at work in the world to save God's people and all of humankind from the powers of sin, death and evil. They just do so in different ways, with different emphases.

An emphasis in the Matthew story before us this morning, one that is present throughout Matthew's Gospel, is righteousness. Joseph is called a righteous man here at the beginning of the story. But what does that mean? Righteous isn't a word we use much outside of church, except maybe ironically. We speak instead of good people, people who do the right thing, people who are responsible, dependable, trustworthy, and kind – the sort of people most of us aspire to be. In the wake of Rob Reiner's tragic death last Sunday, I heard him being talked about this way, using the Yiddish label "mensch." That's as good a word as any to get at what righteous means.

But there is also a problematic side to being a good person. Good people tend live in good neighborhoods, send their children to good schools, and they avoid being around the "wrong" sorts of people. Which is totally understandable, isn't it? You want to live in a good neighborhood so that your family will be safe. You want your children educated at good schools so they can grow up to be good people like you, and get good jobs to support their own good families. And you of course want them to avoid people who would be a bad influence on them. But those good impulses lead to unintended consequences. They lead to good people leaving "bad" neighborhoods and "bad" schools, so that those neighborhoods and schools only become worse, depriving those who remain of good people who might be good influences and partners in making things better.

I'm going to suggest that when Matthew calls Joseph a righteous man here at the beginning of this story, he's telling us that Joseph is this sort of good person – honorable, upright, and responsible. And he's kind too. So, when he finds out that Mary is pregnant, and he knows he's not the father because they haven't lived together yet, he plans to "divorce her quietly," the text tells us, so that she is not publicly disgraced. But make no mistake, he is going to terminate their betrothal and end their relationship. Because that's what a good person needs to do in such circumstances. Her pregnancy is an affront to his honor, to his good name. It cannot be tolerated. It is literally a deal breaker. Goodness demands that Mary and her child be left to their own resources, which in this time and culture would have been very few indeed.

It is at this point that God intervenes, appearing to Joseph in a dream. "Do not be afraid," God says to Joseph. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." "My goodness," Joseph must have thought, "take Mary as my *wife*? After she has gone and gotten herself pregnant?" "My goodness! What about my *goodness*!?" But that was not all. Not only did God want Joseph to marry her, he wanted him to *name* her child. In this culture, that meant accepting as his own a child that wasn't his, adopting him as member of his family. Instead of doing the "right thing" according to the rules, Joseph is being asked not to walk away from this shameful situation, but to walk toward it, to take the shame upon himself in the service of a higher good.

And Joseph does what he is asked. That is perhaps the second miracle in this story. Joseph doesn't say a word in response. He doesn't, like Mary in Luke, answer with "let it be with me according to your will." But his actions convey the same idea loudly and clearly. He is in. He changes his mind and changes his plan. And that, I'll remind you, is the definition of repentance. Joseph here is effectively repenting of his goodness, based only on a promise given to him in a dream, the promise of Emmanuel, "God with us."

But that promise is a clue that Joseph isn't the only one repenting here. The promise of "God with us" is also telling us that God is repenting, changing God's mind. Does that sound blasphemous? If so, it's maybe because our modern translation of the Bible, as good and useful as they are, have hidden from us the idea that God could repent. But in the old King James version – which is full of all kinds of problems, and I don't recommend it as your go-to translation – in the King James I can think of two times off the top of my head when, quote, "God repented of the evil [God] had planned to do." One is in Exodus when Moses talks God out of destroying the Israelites after the golden calf incident, and the other is in my favorite book, Jonah, when the people of Ninevah themselves repent in sackcloth and ashes.

Why, then, would Emmanuel, "God with us," mean that God is repenting? It's because by all rights God should *not* be with us but against us. God is by definition holy, set apart from all that is profane and sinful and evil. And we humans have a terrible track record of being all that: selfish, greedy, unfaithful, indifferent, and cruel — and that's just for starters. I don't have time for the full list. For goodness' sake, and by all that is holy and righteous, God should stay away from the likes of us. But that is just what God in Jesus Christ does *not* do. God will not walk away from our hopeless, shameful situation. God instead walks toward us, taking on our nature and our lot, and comes among us as one of us in Mary's child to be Emmanuel, God with us. God, as it were, buys a house in our bad neighborhood, moves in and sends God's kid to our bad school. And it does not go well for the child. On the cross he will become another victim of our broken system, another momentary headline, another statistic. But this time it is different. Precisely because he is Emmanuel, God with us in the worst of our reality, his story will not end there in his lifeless, crucified body. And because his story does not end there, and because he is Emmanuel, God with *us*, our story continues in him.

That, dear people of God, is the promise of our baptism that opens for us a better future than we could ever have planned for ourselves. That is a promise that allows us to repent of the narrow kind of goodness that would separate us from one another and from the messy, broken world that God has joined God's self to in Jesus. For God, being with us in our trouble is infinitely preferable to being apart from us in God's purity and holiness. And because of that, because God is with us in Jesus right now by the miracle of faith that God is working in our hearts, we too with Joseph do not have to fear anything that is yet to come. We can turn with God toward the trouble in anticipation of God's good future for us and for the whole creation.

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.