



Emmanuel
Sermon on Matthew 1:18-25
Pastor Julie McCain, December 21, 2014

Please pray with me. Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear. Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your grace deep in our hearts. Amen.

As a child, the Christmas season always meant that I waited with bated breath for the day when we would get to go down to candy cane lane—it was a street where what seemed like miles of mansions that were transformed for the holiday season.

Like good Southern Californians, we would get all bundled up to prepare for the terribly frigid 60 degree weather and we'd head out to see the Christmas lights.

But there were not just ORDINARY Christmas lights. EVERY house was decorated, and the neighborhood gave out awards for the most creative display, and for the biggest one, too, so there was competition, too.

Two of my favorites were a 15-foot lighted, fully functional ferris wheel, and in true Southern California style, a hand carved surfing Santa Clause with his jet skiing reindeer.

→It truly was a magical time of the year for me.

And there is so much we anticipate at Christmastime, and so I wonder if you would share with me some of the things you look forward to about Christmas? What are some of your favorite Christmas things?

- Family, friends, presents, time together, lights, Christmas music, good food.

→This season really can be magical for us, with sparkle and twinkle and light everywhere we look, and joyous Christmas carols playing in many a store and home.

But then we know all too well that the other side of this season, with its wild chaos and sheer stress.

And so I wonder if you would share with me what some of the things that stress you out at Christmas?

- Money, family, presents, time

Time is a huge stressor for many of us, throughout the whole year, but it's highlighted at this time of the year.

It always seems as if there is simply too much to be done and far less time than last year to do it all.

And so, before we know it, we get sucked into the hustle and bustle, sucked into the rush of it all, and maybe as we result we might miss the delight of Christmas lights or carols, And maybe we might even miss the wonder and joy of Jesus' birth.

Of course it wasn't the Christmas season for Mary and Joseph, but they knew very well about that other side of life. They knew chaos and stress first-hand.

Now Joseph was a carpenter, and I'm no carpenter, but I've watched my husband work with wood enough to know that there's a fair amount of planning involved. This year he decided to make us some end tables. But he didn't just immediately start cutting the wood. Instead he had to look at the space and think about what size and height would fit well, and he had to carefully plan out how many pieces of wood he'd need for the top and the sides, and then carefully measure the wood. If he had skipped any of those steps he would have ended up with a big old mess.

- 1) And so we know carpenters like Joseph are planners.
- 2) And on another level Joseph and Mary, now engaged, were starting to plan their life together. They were planning where they would live and what they would buy and how they would spend their time together.
There was a lot of planning going on.

→But we know that all will not go according to plan...

We're told that they were engaged, or betrothed might be a better word here, because their engagement was a little different than how we think of it.

For us, an engagement is the period of preparation before a wedding, and it's not all that uncommon for someone to call off an engagement.

In fact, all of us would probably rather that a couple break up while they're engaged than after they're married.

But in Mary and Joseph's day, getting betrothed meant signing legal paperwork, and the wedding day merely signified was the time when they would begin living together as husband and wife. There was no ability to informally break off the betrothal by just slipping off a ring. In order to break the legal bond that Mary and Joseph had, they'd actually had to get something more like a modern-day divorce.

And then there is the story you know so well. Mary is pregnant and the baby isn't Joseph's. It's not at all part of the plan! Mary thinks she is doing God's will, pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But what are the chances of that!? Never in the history of the world has that happened before. And to the one engaged to be married to Mary it sounds like she tried to make up an excuse at the last minute and wasn't able to think of a very good one.

→Now we aren't told how Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, or what he said. Maybe he was awash with questions, his voice raised. Or maybe he was too angry, too confused, too hurt to utter a word at all.

But it is into this reality that an angel of the Lord speaks: Do not be afraid.

Don't be afraid. And I wonder what WE fear this Advent season.

- Maybe it's a recent diagnosis or a long-term health struggle.
- Maybe you fear for the state of a relationship, or you anticipate conflict as you gather with family this season.
- Or maybe a job isn't going well and you worry about what life would look like without that job.

→So many of our fears boil down to the fact that we can't know what our futures hold, and that's terrifying.

Do not be afraid the angel says. And as Pastor Scott said a few weeks ago, we know that someone telling us not to fear when we're shaking in our boots really does not help the situation.

But this time, there's more.

Mary's wild story really is true: The child conceived in her IS from the Holy Spirit, he will save his people from their sins, and you will call him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

God is with you, the ANGEL tells Joseph.

- God is with you when nothing is going as you planned.
- God is with you when your family is more complicated than you'd like.
- God is with you when you don't know which road to take.

And for some reason that is enough for Joseph.

Like us he doesn't know what shape his future will take, but he does know the character of the one making the promises.

And as you and I are all jumbled up this Christmas season with some combination of joy and fear, delighting in the Christ child but stressed about the season,

→It's true that we don't know what the future holds.

But we DO know the one who holds the future in his hands, and he is called Emmanuel, for God is with us.