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Advent 4, Matthew 1:18-25

### “Why the Chimes Rang”

Two of the four gospels narrate the birth of Jesus. The more familiar one, Luke’s poetic version with Ceasar Augustus, shepherds in their fields, and the babe in the manger, we will read on Christmas Eve. Before we get there, though, we have Matthew’s account. And in Matthew’s story Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth has a dream.

Read the scripture:

It is a bit ironic that in the Bible’s world of patriarchy we know little of Joseph. He appears at the beginning of Matthew with his history altering dream and then essentially disappears, only showing up a couple of more times during Jesus’ childhood. Mary, on the other hand, is everywhere. When the angel visits Mary she responds by lifting her voice in song. Mary is much more than the mother of Jesus, she is a disciple, present throughout his earthly ministry, suffering with her Lord at the cross, visiting the empty tomb, receiving the Spirit at Pentecost. In traditional Christian thought Mary is seen as an icon of the very church of Christ, the best that we have to offer, a bundle of Christian energy. When the angel visits Joseph, he is sleeping.

Not one word from Joseph is recorded in the Bible. Even during Christmas Joseph is generally depicted as a murky background sort of character without any serious role, even the shepherds and the wise-men get more press.

My first year out of seminary I was serving at a large church north of Charlotte and very generous ladies of the church thought it would be oh so sweet if the young pastor and his wife would play Mary and Joseph in the church’s annual live nativity. I mounted a protest: Joseph was a younger man, I argued. He would not have had blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, I promised. I am a danger to others with a hammer and saw, I cried to no avail.

As usual in church-life, the lay-people got their way, so I found myself standing for three hours on a frightfully cold December night looking on as men and women, but mostly children stood around our live nativity, approached the manger with wonder coming forward to admire Mary – who was indeed lovely that night – and the baby Jesus, while I worked vigorously to keep the sheep and goats from running into the road.

But while the Bible doesn’t say much about him, and he’s always in the background of Christmas cards and pageants, and he’ll never win an Oscar for his work during a live nativity scene, we know that Joseph is important, because Joseph spent his life

near to Jesus. And this is what all of us should strive for, to spend our lives close to Jesus.

It was Joseph who have taught young Jesus the scriptures, reading him the stories of Genesis, teaching him the Torah, praying through the Psalms.

Joseph, someone not all that different from you and me, he would have had hopes and dreams for what his life was going to be life. For young Jewish men at the time that meant taking part in the life of the Synagogue, learning a good trade, marrying a young woman, and at the time, raising sons. And in one night, those dreams are shattered. An angel appears to Joseph and his neatly ordered life is changed.

Like Mary, he says yes to the Lord. He does not dismiss Mary quietly, but takes on the scandal of this unwed teenager, running off to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth, and then fleeing their homeland with his new family, becoming refugees in Egypt to escape Herod's wrath.

While there is very little in Scripture about Joseph's life, a friend reminded me this week of an early Christian document called: A History of Joseph the Carpenter. That text narrates Joseph's death, which takes place when Jesus is a young man before he begins his ministry. I want you to imagine this scene. In the story, Joseph is lying in his bed at home dying, his son is present with him, at his side.

They exchange tender words. They hold hands. They pray the Psalms. Can you imagine the pain of that moment. Here is Joseph's son, the savior of the world, the one he named Jesus, which literally means, "God Saves," and yet he is simply there, at his side, comforting, present, but he cannot save his own father, or any of us, even himself, from pain and tragedy and death.

And this scene is not so much different from Christmas, for there is great joy that Jesus is with us – and yet pain and tragedy are not erased, rather there is a longing in us for healing and fulfillment that is more acute at Christmas. The hopes and dreams of all the years are met in thee tonight, but not only those hopes and dreams that have come to fruition, that have been all that we imagined and more, but the cradle in Bethlehem also holds onto the broken dreams, the shattered hopes, the life that we dreamed for ourselves and the world around us that seems to have gone all wrong.

Oh yes, Christmas is holly and jolly, but it is also touches the tender and raw parts, the vulnerable parts of our lives, like a helpless babe lying in a manger. This Christmas we will gather with friends and family, we'll go to Christmas Eve services on Friday night, we'll exchange gifts on Saturday morning, and it will be joyful, but it won't be complete. There will be somebody in your life who you loved who is now gone, a father, a mother, a grandparent, a child, a friend, there will be a wound and that wound, that longing will be more acute at Christmas.

The pain and joy of Christmas. And it is not only the loss of a loved one we feel. The lonely are lonelier at Christmas. The hungry are hungrier at Christmas. The poor are

more aware of their poverty, we are all aware of the violence cascading across our world this Christmas.

Henry Wordsworth Longfellow woke up on Christmas morning 1864. He stared out at a world engulfed in violence. A bloody Civil War raging across his homeland. He looked into the acute pain of his own life, his first wife died of a miscarriage, his second wife recently died in a fire, three sons were bearing the weight of union arms. He penned the poem "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," the first two stanzas proclaiming the hope, the beauty, the comfort of Christmas, "I heard the bells on Christmas day, there old familiar Carols play," and then into the third stanza that theme continuing like this:

Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then the poem turns, the final four stanzas embracing the dark pain of the crumbling world around him, before finishing with the hope that is only born at Christmas:

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Can you imagine all the mothers and fathers who will wake up this Christmas morning, look out the window through teary eyes in Sacramento or Minneapolis, Tuscon

or Durham, and think about a son or a daughter who is never coming home for Christmas because they died by way of a roadside bomb outside Baghdad, or sniper fire in Fallujah, or I think of the thousands of Iraqi fathers and mothers who will weep for their children, their children who were killed in a US missile attack, or an armored vehicle offensive, and the pain will be just as acute

Into this world Jesus comes. Not to make everything all better, not to save us from the pain and tragedy of our lives, not to quick fix the broken dreams, but to simply be Emmanuel, God with us. The expectations of the times, and I suspect the expectations that haunt our own desires, would be that God's gift would be something big and flashy. Yet the little child that we receive is tender, vulnerable, helpless like we are. Most unexpected gift, and yet it is the one that we so desperately need.

I want to close this morning with an old Christmas legend

Many many years ago in a country far away there was a great church. And every Sunday morning and on all the festive days of the year, like Christmas, the church would fill with thousands of people. The church was so large that standing at the back one could barely see to the front, and people for miles around would seek shelter when the organ played for they were sure a thunderstorm was on the way. The tower of the church was so high, that only on the fairest and brightest of days was it possible to see to the top. At the top of the tower there was a beautiful chime, and the legend said that on Christmas Eve when all the rich and important people would bring forth their gifts to the Christ child, when the perfect gift was laid upon the altar, the angels would come and make the chimes play, though no one had ever heard them.

An old woman in town claimed that her mother had heard them, once, when her mother was only a little girl. In the adjacent town lived two poor boys, Pedro and Little brother. On Sunday mornings they could hear the organ play and on bright days they could see the tower, though they had never been. But this year they planned to go to the great Christmas Eve festival, they had been plotting all year long and finally the day had come. They struck out into the snowy evening and made their way towards the church. Suddenly, Pedro stumbled across something in the snow. He knelt down and brushed away the snow and saw that it was a poor woman who had fallen asleep. He looked at Little brother and said we cannot leave her here, she'll surely freeze to death. She looks like the Madonna from the church windows. And then, blinking back the tears, he said, I'll stay with her. I'll rub her to keep her warm. I'll give her some of my coffee, and I've brought a bun that she can eat. You go ahead, Little brother, go to the Christmas festival. We are not far now. When you get to the church send somebody back to help me. But we have waited all year to go together, Little brother said, his eyes welling up. I know, said Pedro, that is why you must go and see everything twice, once for you and once for me. And if you have a chance, go down the altar and take this little piece of silver that I've been saving up all year, and give it to the Christ child.

And just like that Little brother ran off into the snow and gathering darkness.

The festival was magnificent, thousands had gathered. The organ sounded and the choir sang. Then the great procession of gifts to the Christ child began, all the

important people brought their gifts down the aisle. Surely, everyone thought, this year, the chimes would ring. One man had a bag of gold so heavy he could barely lift it, that he sat down on the altar. An author who had been working on a book for eight years took his manuscript and laid it open for the Christ child.

At the end of the procession came the king. He marched forward towards the altar, and just as he got there he took his crown and placed it on the table – everyone gasped, now they would hear the chimes ring, they were certain. But nothing was heard but the cold wind whistling around the church. The congregation began to mutter, many claimed that they had never really believed the legend of the chimes.

The service went on and the organ played and the choir sang. And then at the end of the service the old minister made his way to the front and he raised his shaky hands to offer the benediction. Just then, the people noticed the small silhouette of Little brother, who had been working his way down the long side aisle and finally he had made his way to the front of the church. In the stillness of that moment Little brother raised Pedro's silver coin and placed the gift on the altar – and then . . . distinctly . . . there was the most beautiful sound that anyone had ever heard. Amen.