

23 December 2007
Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“An Even Greater Mercy”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25 (Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is said that sons follow in the footsteps of their fathers. That is often so. But today, in the Holy Gospel, it is the other way around. The father is following in the footsteps of his son.

Matthew tells us the Christmas story from Joseph’s point of view. Joseph was a just man, which means not so much that he was a good man in worldly terms, but that he was a man of faith, whose life was shaped and formed by God’s Word. He was just because He believed in the promises of God and the grace and mercy God had always shown to His people . . . and, Joseph believed, would also be shown to him.

And so it was that when he found that his betrothed, Mary, was bearing a child that was not his, he did not resolve to do what he could have done – that is, have Mary stoned for her infidelity. No, he did not want to expose her to public shame, and worse. So even though he believed he had been wronged, **he resolved to be merciful**. He would instead divorce Mary quietly. He would release her from her vow to him, and let her go to instead marry the man who fathered this child.

But before he could carry out his merciful plan, Joseph was shown **an even greater mercy than his**. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him that this child was not the result of infidelity, but of *fidelity*. That is, of God being *faithful* to His promise to send a Saviour. No man had fathered this child – it was God Himself, come down in mercy. Just as Isaiah the prophet had written over 700 years ago (a word of promise that a just and godly man like Joseph would have known well): “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*” Yes, Mary was still a virgin. And this child was not only a son of man, but the Son of God.

And so Joseph puts aside his plans. Mary had been faithful to him. God also had been faithful. So too would he be faithful, though this was by no means the easy way out. Much difficulty, hardship, and shame would be the result for him, but he would do now as he had always done before – believe in the grace and mercy of God promised to him, to see them through.

This version of the Christmas story (from Joseph’s point of view) – while not as well-known as Luke’s version, with its idyllic setting and story of the little town of Bethlehem and the manger and the animals and no room at the inn and the angels and shepherds and the joy of a new birth, and all of that – Matthew’s version shows us, *through Joseph*, **what God is doing for us here**. For surely, we are the betrothed of the Lord. The Israel of the Old Testament and the Church of the New are the Bride waiting for our heavenly bridegroom. God has chosen Israel to be His own, and Israel had responded in kind: **“Yes, you will be our God, and we will be your people.”** And so we also have promised to be faithful.

Yet have we been faithful? *Has God been our God, and have we been His people?* It is easy to point the finger at Old Testament Israel, and how they committed spiritual adultery with all kinds of idols and false gods. But we too have been unfaithful to our vows. Our spiritual paramours may be more subtle than the Baals and Ashteroths of the Old Testament, but they are false gods nonetheless. For where is our love? In God, or the things of this world? Which do we more readily do: sin to get the things of this world, or give up the things of this world for God? And who do we seek to please most of the time: God, others, or ourselves? Are His ways our ways? His love our love?

And so God is the one whose betrothed has been unfaithful to Him. Yes, and He rightfully has every reason to let us go, and if it is our false gods that we want to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, then it is our false gods we shall have . . . which will end in our eternal death. And that is what we deserve.

But even though God has been wronged, **still He resolves to be merciful . . .** and even more, **to be faithful**. He will *not* abandon His bride or give her up. He will not let us go. Instead, He comes to be with us. And not only to be with us, but to take us into Himself. To unite us to Himself as one flesh. God and man together. And what God has joined together, no man will put asunder. And that is what Joseph’s eyes beheld that night in Bethlehem: a mercy even greater than his. A faithfulness beyond all telling. God and man united together in one flesh, in the baby, cradled

in his wife's arms. This baby whom Joseph would obediently name Jesus, for yes, this is God come to save His people from their sins.

And as the child grew, He would singularly devote Himself to His bride, even going to the cross to lay down His life for her. For us. To wash us clean from our spiritual infidelity in the forgiveness of our sins, and put on us the white dress of virginity and fidelity.

And thus you have been washed – the waters of Holy Baptism not only washing you clean, but uniting you to your Bridegroom, on the cross *and* in the life of His resurrection, that you may live a new life. And you are cared for by your faithful God as well. Given shelter here in His Church. Fed by His own body and blood. And hearing of His love every time you hear those wonderful words: “*I forgive you all your sins.*” For are they not the words of His fidelity and faithfulness to us! Not divorcing or separating Himself from us, but declaring His love to us, over and over again.

Yes, Joseph, you are indeed a just man! For you followed in the footsteps of your son. In the love and mercy of God, shown to us in this newborn babe. Now we too are privileged to do the same, and walk no longer in our own ways, but in His way. The way of the cross. The way of mercy and forgiveness. **Following in the footsteps of the Son**, who has shown such great mercy and love to us, in His birth, in His cross, and still today on the altar. That we see here *Immanuel, God with us* – and receiving Him, take Him out into all the world. That His mercy and love be not just a word or a rumor, but a greater mercy, enfleshed now also in us.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.