

18 December 2016
Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“It’s On!”

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.

The last time Christmas fell on a Sunday, there was quite a hub-bub over churches which decided to cancel their services that day. For, they said, they usually didn’t have church on Christmas, and the fact that it fell on a Sunday wasn’t going to change things. It was a family day, they said. For most were large churches that depend on hundreds of volunteers to run everything they have going on, and they didn’t want them to have to “work” on Christmas. We don’t have that problem so much, which is how it should always be. For church - no matter how big or small you are, and no matter which Sunday or holy day of the year it may be - is for you to come and stop from your work; to rest in the presence of the Lord and receive the gifts of God.

Now, I bring all that up not to criticize churches that will not have church next Sunday, but simply because it seemed to me that just as these churches cancel on Christmas, Joseph almost cancelled Christmas, too. For, as we heard, when he found out that Mary was *great with child*, he wanted no part of it. He didn’t want this job. He wanted out. He resolved *to divorce her quietly*.

But God would not have this day go away or be cancelled quite so easily. So He sends His angel to speak to Joseph. To set him straight. To explain why there must be Christmas. And to help him understand. That this child was not the result of Mary’s infidelity, but of God’s fidelity. Not Mary’s unfaithfulness, but God’s faithfulness. Not a result of sin, but to save from sin. To save Joseph from *his* sins. To save the world from sin. So take her as your wife, the angel said. This is bigger than both of you.

Bigger, for this is a story that had been shaped and planned and prepared for thousands of years. This was no last minute gift idea - this was God’s plan from the beginning, and even before that. And so when Adam and Eve sinned and plunged the world into sin, God didn’t have to sit for a spell and figure out what He was going to do! He knew. And He rushed to Adam and Eve to tell them. So they wouldn’t despair. They needed to know that He was going to send a Saviour. To undo what they had done. To rescue and save them.

And then God repeated that promise through the ages. To people damaged by sin. To

men and women under the burden of sin. To folks in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death. To folks like you. That we not despair, but have hope. To call all people to faith in God and His promise, that a Saviour was on the way.

And finally He got to Ahaz, king of the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah. Now, Ahaz was not the best king, and things were not going well. The northern kingdom of Israel and the Syrians had joined together against Ahaz and Judah. And it seemed like war was imminent - a war Judah was unlikely to win. So Ahaz was worried and fearful.

But God wasn't going to let Judah be conquered - not yet, not now, anyhow. So God wants to reassure Ahaz and tells him to ask for a sign that He is with them; that He will protect and deliver them. Ahaz, under the pretense of piety and not wanting to tempt God, won't ask. But God gives him a sign anyway. And a most unlikely one. **A virgin**, He says, **shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us.)** That is how you will know, Ahaz, that God is with you; that He will protect and deliver you.

God would *partially* fulfill that sign during the reign and life of Ahaz, but the full and ultimate fulfillment of that promise would be as Matthew said today. When the virgin *Mary* conceived a son, who would be not just the son of Mary, but the Son of God. God with us, to protect and deliver us from an enemy far more threatening and deadly than Israel and Syria - from our archenemies of sin, death, and the devil.

St. Paul spoke of Jesus in just that way to the Romans, as we also heard today. That Jesus was no ordinary man, born in the ordinary way. But that He was **descended from David** through Mary **according to the flesh**, but was also **declared to be the Son of God in power** - His resurrection from the dead being proof.

So the plan was now accomplished. No more waiting. Now was just the right time. And not from Sarah, Rebekah, or Rachel did the Saviour come. Not from Bathsheba or any other wife of the patriarchs or kings of Israel. But who would have guessed it? *From Mary*. Little ol' Mary of Nazareth. Mary, who nobody had ever heard of before this. And no high, mighty, or famous man would be his guardian-father - but Joseph. A carpenter. And they were a couple not even married yet.

But it had to be this way. So that Jesus would be born without the stain of sin. That He be conceived not in the natural way, but by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God spoken to Mary. That from that one, single fertilized egg on, He was the holy Son of God and the sinless son of Mary - two natures, divine and human, in one person. God and man. The promised Saviour.

So Joseph awakens from his dream and does what the angel said. And Christmas isn't cancelled after all. The birth is on, and the battle is on. Jesus is born.

So those churches that think Christmas is a family day . . . well, they're part right. It is a family day, but the question is: *which family?* The Son of God came, *adverted*, into a human family, but in order to create a new family. A family of His own. A family that will far outlast our earthly families. A family of faith. A family born from above as He was - by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God spoken or poured out on us in Baptism. And Christmas is a day for that family to be together; for *this* family to be together - with one another and with our Father and brother. Jesus' family. Sons and daughters of men and yet at the same time sons and daughters of God.

So the divine and human Jesus has both divine and human families, as do we. And both are blessings. We shouldn't pit one against the other. It is a mistake to keep the human family Christmas and cancel the divine family Christmas, but it would also be a mistake to keep the divine family Christmas and cancel the human family Christmas. It's not one or the other - it is God who gives and creates both for us, to give us good and to give us joy. That we don't always receive good and joy from our families, well, *that's why Jesus is here.*

Because our families sin against us, and we sin against them. And that's just a portion of the sin in the world, and of the sin that both erupts and creeps out of us. And sometimes we've been hurt and let down by our families and others so much, and think also that *we'll* never get better and improve, that we just want a divorce. From the world. From our families. We don't want it anymore. We want out. Wouldn't that be better? Joseph thought so.

But not an angel, but the Word of God Himself, tells us **no**. *Don't be afraid*, He says. You have a Saviour. He gives you the forgiveness you need, and the forgiveness you need to forgive others. To heal and restore us and our families. To make us what we once were and as we were created to be. Life is messy, as Joseph found out that day. But Jesus and His forgiveness cleans it up. Only He can.

And so He does. Jesus goes from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross. And there He sheds His blood that atones for our sin and cleanses our hearts. There He declares that even though we are an unfaithful, sinful bride, He would not divorce us. He's not out - He's all in. For you. Laying down His life that you might live. Live now, and live forever.

And live on Christmas Day. When the joy of the gift opening is past. When the tidings of great joy are engulfed by the shouts of sin again. When the lights go out and the darkness comes back. When family disputes resurface and problems come back. 'Cause they always do. Family Christmases don't last. But Jesus' Christmas does. Because it's not just a day. Jesus comes for you in His Word, to give you the faith and hope, the forgiveness and peace that you need. He comes to you here with His Body and Blood, to

forgive you, strengthen you, and live in you. He sends His Spirit to help and guide you. Whatever you need, He is here to give and provide.

As He did for Mary and Joseph. And not just in the nine months before Christmas and on Christmas, but in the months and years after that. For things didn't get any easier for them. They had to live with the stigma of having an illegitimate child because the world didn't understand. They had to flee to protect the life of their child, and live in a strange country for a while. You got that beat? Maybe you do.

But God's all in **for you**. No matter how bad things get, He never wants out of your life. And even if it seems to you like He is - like maybe it seemed to Joseph - He's not. The Word of God told him and tells us.

And so, He says, *do not be afraid*. God is working. You're family, and He's your Father and Saviour. And He has a gift for you. Maybe not what you always wanted, but everything you need for a Merry Christmas . . . and more.

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.