

The Christmas Story: A Story of Interruptions – Matthew 1:18-25

Plymouth Park, Advent 1, Year A, December 2, 2007

Silent Night. Holy night. All is calm; all is bright. Round yon virgin, mother and child. Holy infant so, tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.

It sounds so tranquil, doesn't it? So calm and peaceful. The Son of God coming into the world, silently. I don't know about you, but such a rendition of the Christmas story is hard for me to believe.

The virgin birth? That I can believe; that's a fathomable miracle ... but a calm, silent, peaceful birth before the advent of epidurals and pain medications? This requires more faith than I can muster.

Of course, this is not what the song is talking about. The silence *Silent Night* speaks of is not the silence of a birth—for no matter how great your pain medications or your pain endurance, no one has a silent night when a child is ready to come into the world.

This favorite Christmas carol speaks about peace, the peace that Jesus brings, the silence of his presence in the midst of a world filled with noise. After all, this baby is the one who will still the storms, calm the grieving father, and quiet the demon-possessed.

This is the Son of God, the King of the World, born in such beauty and tenderness, in a manger behind an inn in the little town of Bethlehem.

How could such a Christmas story not bring about silence, peacefulness and awe?

I don't know about you, but when I begin to hear Christmas songs play in department stores and over the radio, my heart becomes a little lighter. All that has weighed on my soul the past year is calmed as I hear the latest renditions of the classic Christmas songs we all love.

Perhaps you've felt such a feeling when you walked into the building this morning: the halls have been decked. The wreaths and trees are up. The poinsettias we begged you to sign-up to purchase last week are now purchased and here, in all their Christmas glory.

It's hard to be troubled during a season like this. It's hard to be filled with hate and rage and doubt. When the Christmas Tree lights are blinking, when the cards come in the mail, when the presents are wrapped and families come together again—it is a silent night, a holy night, when all is calm and all is bright.

But before long, the Christmas songs are no longer heard over the radio. Come December 26th and we're antsy to get the Christmas decorations boxed up and the tree carried to the curb. No more time for heavenly peace. We've got to wait in long customer service lines to exchange presents. We've got to sit down with a financial planner to plan our way out of the debt of this year's Christmas.

Oh, it was a good Christmas. It was a peaceful Christmas, but it was only a momentary peacefulness. A fleeting peacefulness. We can't stay in Bethlehem forever. We can't gather with the Shepherds and Magi and the Angels and sing praises to the newborn king forever. There's a real world out there, a world that exists a part from the promise and hope of Christmas.

A world where "peace on Earth" is merely a holiday greeting wished upon us in Hallmark cards, but far from a reality.

There's a real world out there where we debate all day the literalness of the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus, yet we live like he was never born at all.

There's a real world out there, a world where there is no silence, no calm, no tenderness, and no peace. A world of broken-hearts and broken promises. A world filled with injustice, unrighteousness and hopelessness.

A world with cancer, and war, and divorce, and racism, and poverty, and hunger. And a world that believes that the world will always be filled with such things.

What does the Christmas story have to say to such a world as this? Is Christmas merely a time to retreat briefly from the real world, to deck the halls with meaningless hope that offers nothing but a momentary escape from the troubles that will still be around long after the lights are taken down and the trees carried to the curb?

What good are our carols, our decorations, and our season's greetings in a world that is falling a part at the seams on a path of self-destruction?

Maybe I'm being a bit of a scrooge this morning, but as I celebrate Christmas every year, I must admit there is hidden cynicism I carry with me. I may sing peace on earth, good will toward men, but I don't really believe it. The Christmas Story is wonderful, amazing, and hopeful—but faced with the reality of a world gone mad...can this story be anything more than a story, or is it simply a brightly decorated present under our tree, wrapped with the finest paper and ribbon, yet inside is nothing but empty hope and used up wishes?

What does the Christmas story have to do with the real world?

In this morning's gospel reading, Joseph comes to grips with the real world. Joseph was engaged, betrothed to the love of his life, Mary. Like most people

who are in love, Joseph had been living in a dream world. A world of wedding preparations and engagement photos. A world of picking out flowers and tuxes, of parties and late nights dreaming with your fiancé of the wonderful life you will soon enjoy together. They didn't have a care in the world. Life was truly wonderful—they were truly blessed. The world was good and right. No one could be any happier than Mary and Joseph.

And then Joseph's world is interrupted. Apparently, all wasn't as happy and carefree as Joseph believed. Mary was pregnant, and he knew for sure the baby was not his. The dream world he had been living in was forever gone. Receiving the news that your fiancé was pregnant with another man's baby does more than simply wreck your marriage plans—it wrecks your life!

But Joseph had more to deal with now than simply a broken marriage. How would he respond to Mary? What would he do? For Joseph and Mary in their ancient culture, betrothal was much more serious than our engagement. In a betrothal the couple would make a legal covenant with one another, a legal-binding covenant, and breaking such a covenant was punishable by death. Yes, there was a way of dissolving the covenant, but this was only done through divorce. You had to get lawyers, make it official. No throwing the ring back at your fiancé, saying there would be no wedding. Betrothal was serious business and you did not enter into such an agreement lightly, nor did you dissolve it lightly.

According to the law Mary had broken her betrothal covenant and it was within Joseph's rights to have her and the father of the baby drug into the public square and stoned to death. That's the punishment for breaking the betrothal by infidelity.

Joseph must have considered this option. A broken-heart can drive you to do some crazy things in the name of revenge. As he thought about Mary being pregnant, wondering who the father was, wondering if they were in love or was it only a one night stand—it's enough to drive you mad with anger.

Yet somehow in the midst of his pain, he makes a rational choice. Though Mary had broken his heart, even though he believes she no longer loves him, if she ever did, he still loves Mary and he can't bear to see her punished for her infidelity.

So he makes a plan. It's not too late to get a divorce and end the betrothal. He will dismiss Mary quietly, not causing her any extra shame, and then never see her again. This is his only hope of carrying on with his life.

And when he was about to call in the lawyers and make it official, his life is interrupted again by more shocking news...

Now, I've had some crazy dreams in my time. And it seems the craziest dreams come to you when your heart has been broken and your future interrupted. Joseph has one of those dreams. I'm sure he tossed and turned that night...unable to quiet his thoughts, unable to get the idea of Mary with another man out of his head. All that he had wished for, gone. After hours of restlessness, exhaustion kicks in and he finally goes to sleep. But the sleep will provide him no rest. Though his body is asleep, his thoughts are still wide-awake as he dreams.

It is there in his dreams that an angel speaks to him. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Perhaps it really was just a dream, a dream Joseph's subconscious had created to explain away the pain and brokenness he felt; an illusion, allowing Joseph to ignore the truth of the situation so that he could forgive Mary and the wedding could go on.

That's not how Matthew sees it. As Matthew tells us the story, these words spoken to Joseph in a dream, are more than just a dream. They are the angelic message from God himself, the fulfillment of the prophets and the answer to the longing of humanity since the beginning of time.

Joseph is not crazy with a broken heart. He has not lost his mind. This is real life—an angel really spoke to Joseph; Mary really was impregnated by the Holy Spirit with the very Son of God, and they would soon be married as planned. And not only that...but this miracle child would one day save his people from their sins.

That's how Matthew sees it anyway. Perhaps Matthew has lost his mind too; after all, this is a hard story to believe. Yet not only does Matthew believe it; Joseph believes it.

And when he wakes up he goes and finds Mary, they are married, and she gives birth to a son and Joseph names that son Jesus.

This is more than a silent night. There's a lot in this story that is not calm and bright. This is the story of two lives, interrupted by pregnancy—but more than that, interrupted by God.

Here they were, ordinary Jews trying to live out their lives, doing the best they could to live a happy, fulfilling life, and God interrupts it all never consulting Mary and Joseph about it.

Mary is pregnant, and there's nothing they can do to change that fact. Their lives are forever changed, their plans forever altered. God has moved in the world, or, really, God has moved into the world, making his home in Mary's womb. This is it. This is reality now. The question given to Mary and Joseph is how will they respond to the move of God?

For Joseph, the answer could have easily been no. He could have walked away. It's hard enough to raise another person's baby...but to raise the Son of God? Yeah, he was a righteous man, but how righteous do you have to be to be the adoptive father of God in the flesh?

Mary could have said no, too. I'm sure there were ways of ending the pregnancy if she really wanted to. Or, if she went through with it, she could have given the child up for adoption, or left the child in the care of the priest in the temple like the barren woman Hannah once did with her child, the prophet Samuel.

Yet faced with such a daunting task, having their entire lives forever interrupted, Mary and Joseph say yes. They agree to partner with God to birth Jesus into the world.

And because of their decision and their faith, here we are over 2000 years later telling their story—the greatest story ever told—the story of the Son of God, born in the flesh, saving his people from their sins.

Don't you just love the Christmas story? Don't you just love Christmas time? It's a blessed time, a happy time. Here we are, gathered together to rehearse again the greatest story ever told. Over the next four weeks we will hear this story time and time again. We will watch Christmas pageants and movies telling this story, read books about this story, sing songs about this story, and read the Gospels over and over as we celebrate once again the birth of Jesus into this world.

But our world wants to know if this story we celebrate is more than simply a story. Will our celebration of the Christmas story this year only give us a momentary retreat from the real world, a world gone mad on the path of self-destruction? Will our celebration of the Christmas story this year only speak of the birth of Jesus who will save his people from their sins?

For several years we've heard of the "war on Christmas." As the story goes, our secular, godless country is making an assault on Christmas. If these Christmas war-mongers had their way, there would be no Christ in Christmas, no *Silent Night* or *O Little Town of Bethlehem*—it would simply be a time of Santa Claus and reindeers and Frosty the Snow Man. How dare they take Christ out of Christmas? How dare they not allow us our rights as American citizens to celebrate our faith publicly during this holy season!

To tell you the truth, I'm not that worried. If my Walmart employees are not allowed to tell me "Merry Christmas" as I go through the checkout line, I think I will be okay. If the Christmas decorations in public places don't include a manger scene...it's not the end of the world.

Actually, if you will permit me to say so, such a turn of events may be a good thing for us Christians. For we get so hopped up on holiday cheer, singing our carols and making our season's greetings that we forget the true meaning of the story.

The Christmas story is not about you and I decorating our home and our sanctuaries with holiday cheer. The Christmas story isn't about the right to celebrate Jesus' birth publicly.

In fact, this story we all love so much and celebrate every year is more than a story. Our goal as the church is not simply to keep this story alive, to fight for our right to tell it in public, letting every one know the reason behind the season.

Our goal is to become a part of the story. To not only sing about the birth of Jesus as a baby, but to allow Jesus to be birthed into the world through us.

It's true...our world is falling a part at the seems, on the road to self-destruction. And if we are to save our world, to truly save our world, it's going to take a lot more than a story to do the job.

To save our world, we must become a part of this story, to become like Mary and Joseph, allowing our lives to be interrupted dramatically, so that through our lives God can bring salvation into our world.

We are Christians. That means that we too, like Mary, have Jesus, the Son of God living inside of us. Given that news, how will we respond? Will we simply carry Jesus around inside of us telling the story? Or will we go out into the midst of the world, into the midst of the pain, the midst of the brokenness and injustice, and birth Jesus into the world?

In other words, will we just tell the Christmas story? Or will this year be the year we actually become the Christmas story?

Our world eagerly waits for our lives to be interrupted so that through us God can birth salvation into our world.