

**Christ Church Episcopal in Harwich Port, MA**  
**Sermon for December 22, 2013**                      **Judith Davis, Rector**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**

This Wednesday we concluded our viewing of the movie version of *Godspell* in our Bible study. As I sat watching the movie, I was thinking that this story of Jesus is so incredible, that I wonder why more people in history have not just gone headlong to follow him and change the world, why more people have not dropped everything to follow him and his law of love. Showing the love for the outcast and lowly, those who are marginalized, showing hope for the future, light for the world, encouragement for those who are lost, learning the parables that Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds who followed him. A great song in *Godspell* is “You are the light of the world,”

You are the light of the world  
But the tallest candlestick  
Ain't much good without a wick  
You've got to live right to be the light of the world

Then I think back to the stories of the first century told by the apostle Paul and the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They talk about the crowds gathering to hear Jesus and also about the spreading of the gospel story of Jesus after his death and resurrection. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s account has Jesus telling the people they are the light of the world. People followed his teaching and his way of love. They went about healing and teaching and breaking bread with everyone who would come. They shared what they had in common.

Then we come to our own day and I ask myself why Church participation has declined so much in the last 30 years, why giving is down in churches, why mission work is not so visible, and I wonder if we’re telling the story or if we are stuck and not following Jesus any more.

Then I see *Godspell* and I’m thrilled with this story yet again. Then I read the scriptures for Advent, and I’m excited again about this Palestinian Jew who came from God to be incarnate in human flesh, to enter history at a time when the world desperately needed to be changed from the power of the empire to the power of God. And I think of us, our culture, the greed and inequity in the world, the struggle of

those of us who are being squeezed out of the middle class by the rich and powerful, and about others who have become so marginalized right in front of us. And I think that our world is so much like the world of the first century that desperately needed a savior to come and be countercultural and bring justice and peace and love to the world and to be the light, the Dayspring, the Morning Star to enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. And not only to be the light but to light a small flame in each of us, that we might carry that light of Christ into the world that the world might be changed.

I've seen a lot of the shadow of death recently with Walter Wade, Anne's mother Margaret Gilson, Anne Patterson and just this week, Milton Hirshberg dying in our midst. I've stood in cold cemeteries, the wind and snow and ice around us and I've pondered life and death. When loved ones die we find ourselves thinking more about the purpose of our lives, about what a difference we make or could have made in our lives, and about how we can decide to make a difference in the future. And I think of the families of these who have died, real people with the ups and downs of life.

And then I come to the story of Joseph in today's gospel account in Matthew. What we have in this birth story that Matthew tells is not the pretty manger scene with angels and shepherds, but a real life dilemma. Joseph and Mary have made a legal agreement for an arranged marriage, which was the custom in their day, and everything has been set except that they haven't had the Jewish wedding and the moving in together after that. Their families have made this contract however. Mary is a teenager and Joseph is older. So, you can imagine the scenario when Joseph finds out that Mary is going to have a baby. According to the story, he knows the baby is not his and wonders how this all happened. The custom in those days was that his choice was to disgrace her or quietly divorce her, and he is about to choose the latter option when he has a dream. God appears to him and says that the child Mary has conceived is from God and that Joseph is to be his earthly father and at the appropriate day in the Temple, to name him Jesus because God has sent him to save his people from their sins. So Joseph's role as Jesus' earthly father is established and he will marry Mary and fulfill his role, but all the turmoil in the families must have been difficult.

We're not used to this. We're accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, and that's appropriate. But let's not forget the distress, sense of betrayal, disappointment, and a host of other emotions that Joseph must have experienced, or the fear and hurt that Mary would likely have also felt as they sorted out their divinely complex relationship.

Why might that be helpful? Because Mary and Joseph aren't merely characters from a stained-glass window, or a Fra Angelico painting, but flesh and blood people. And the more we can imagine them as people *like us* -- with ups and downs to their relationships, for instance -- the more we might imagine ourselves to be people *like them* -- that is, people who go through all kinds of things, some quite damaging, and yet whom God uses nevertheless to accomplish God's purposes.<sup>1</sup>

So, imagining Mary and Joseph as real people is really helpful as we ponder the Christmas story. And another point in that pondering is this: this birth happened more privately than we are told by Luke, for example. People missed the scenario. Joseph and Mary must have gone away quietly while they awaited the birth of Jesus, at least until Joseph had to go to his home town of Bethlehem to register for taxes. So because this birth happened the way all children are born into the world, many people missed it and perhaps that's why Matthew writes about it. And he makes the point that Jesus came into the world just like each of us did and he lived as a child like most children. So, maybe that is why we do not have details of his childhood. He grew up and went to Hebrew School and learned Torah and went to Temple with his family. He was a real human being like us, incarnate in our own flesh, like one of us.

So on this day, so close to Christmas Eve when we will hear the angels sing once more about the miraculous birth of baby Jesus, let us celebrate the normalcy of Jesus as one of us, whom God used to show us the way to eternal life. Jesus came into the world as an ordinary baby to show us the way and to deliver us from sin, fear, and death *and* to have us be reborn as the children of God as the light of the world in our own day.

In *Godspell*, one of the great songs is “You are the Light of the World,” which is part of a song about the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus preaches.

You are the light of the world!  
You are the light of the world!  
But if that light is under a bushel,  
Brrr, it's lost something kind of crucial  
You got to stay bright to be the light of the world

So let your light so shine before men  
Let your light so shine  
So that they might know some kindness again  
We all need help to feel fine (let's have some wine!)  
You are the light of the world  
You are the light of the world  
But the tallest candlestick  
Ain't much good without a wick  
You've got to live right to be the light of the world

Remember that you, as a child of God, are called to bring the light of Christ into the world where you are that others might see that you believe in the power of Christ to change the world through us. When you light up your decorations this week and admire your lighted Christmas tree, remember the real reason for all the lights is that Christ is the true light that lightens up all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and he has empowered us to be his little lights in our world.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is from David Lose at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)