

Sermon Notes for 12/18/16 (Advent 4)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Matthew 1:18-25
Theme: STRANGE BEGINNINGS FOR A WORLD MESSIAH

The Point: Our Lord works His magnificent salvation for the world through a Jewish-born child of no significance except by God's doing.

Introduction: So, if you were going to design a plan for rescuing the world, how would you go about it? Would you hire a Madison Avenue advertising firm to make sure every detail of the undertaking was broadcast by as many TV networks and radio stations as possible? Would you find ways to provide for the huge budget that would be required to guarantee that all aspects of the plan would be successful? Would you prepare a government-based coalition that could make sure legislation and enforcement measures were in place at just the right time? Would you network with all the local schools and other agencies so that every family was well aware of what was going on and why?

Well, in today's readings (especially in today's Gospel), we find some STRANGE BEGINNINGS FOR A WORLD MESSIAH. This Gospel history is not what we would expect, if we were to be the ones making plans for saving the world. The world is desperate for a Messiah, there is no doubt about that. Just watch how people despise and mistreat and hate and kill one another. Just watch how people try to justify their own wrongdoings, even while they condemn those who are doing the same things. Look at the broken homes, broken marriages, broken relationships, broken lives, even broken churches. Pay attention to the sick, the suffering, the homeless, the jobless, the lonely, the hopeless. We need a Messiah, for sure.

But God certainly has a strange way of going about saving the world, doesn't He? Look at what He does. He works through the nation of Israel, a group that is marginalized, detested, tormented, defeated and tossed aside by just about every world power around. One man has said it this way: "How odd of God to choose the Jews!" We would no doubt agree. Abraham's descendants, with very few exceptions (especially the time under David's and Solomon's reigns), are bit players on the stage of world history. But that doesn't seem to bother our God, does it?

In fact, He makes this inconsequential nation the very centerpiece of His plan to rescue a broken world. Egypt had the pharaohs and the pyramids, Babylon had the hanging gardens, China had its great wall, Assyria had powerful kings, one after another. But God did not choose to work through any of these world powers. He promised that the Messiah would be born of Abraham's seed, in David's line, of Judah's seed.

God picks up on a seven-century-old promise spoken to Ahaz, that rotten, faithless king of the nation of Israel. God puts that promise into motion: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Who would have thought that such a thing would be the foundation of the world's salvation?! It is unique, you have to admit that. Well, maybe not so much in our day, since gynecology and genetic research have made it possible for almost any virgin to become pregnant with the right application of scientific and medical advancement.

But in Mary's day it was not so. Science had no way of producing or even inducing a pregnancy. And yet a little unknown, backwoods Israelite girl receives the visit from the angel, and suddenly the Holy Spirit has made a deposit in her womb by her agreement, though she can hardly understand the sort of commitment this action will involve for her and for her Joseph. This little Jewish teenager gives her assent, and through her God promises to bring a Messiah into the world.

Then Mary tries to convince Joseph just what is going on. But wait a minute! He is not about to be taken

in by such a crazy story, not even by one whom he thought he knew and whom he had agreed to marry. Joseph and Mary had gone through the formal ceremony of betrothal, in which they had pledged themselves to one another and promised to be married in the near future. But now, before the marriage ceremony itself can be arranged, she turns up pregnant. Not good news! What is God up to, anyway?

Now it seems that this humble Jewish maid is going to have to have the baby on her own, without even the support of a husband, for Joseph is determined to divorce her. After serious deliberation and prayer, he thought this was the best he could offer. He could hardly agree to accept into his home a wife who was “spoiled goods”. Everything in his background had taught him that. But he didn’t want his betrothed, his beloved, to end up being stoned. That was, after all, what the law of Moses had required for adultery. Divorce seemed the best option for Joseph – put her away, do it quietly, without fanfare, and hope to escape with his own reputation intact. But God had other ideas.

So in Joseph’s dreams at night, the angel spoke to him. First, the angel calmed Joseph’s fears about taking Mary as his wife: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” That does not make this an easy or comfortable decision, but it is God’s movement that matters. To act according to His will is to act without fear and with confidence. Then the angel confirmed Mary’s report about the origins of this child: “for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Mary had not concocted the story – she had told the truth, and now Joseph would share in the implications of this truth. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Is this any way to save a world?

Down to the name of this Child, God’s plans are evident. Who would have expected the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the chosen King of Israel, the Son of David, the Root of Jesse, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, to come into the world in this humble fashion, born to an unimportant young woman from a nothing place like Nazareth? Strange beginnings for a world Messiah, wouldn’t you say? And yet here is the truth about this Gift of God to humanity. Galatians 4:4-5 “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” The Lord of the universe saw fit to rescue us through the coming of His own dear Son. What more magnificent means of salvation could have possibly been devised?!

When Henry Norris Russell, the Princeton astronomer, had concluded a lecture on the Milky Way, a woman came to him and asked, “If our world is so little, and the universe is so great, can we believe God really pays any attention to us?” Dr. Russell replied, “That depends, madam, entirely on how big a God you believe in.” (*Today in the World*, Feb 89, p. 12) So, how big is our God? Is He big enough to save a world through a child born of a virgin and laid in a manger?

God’s style is far more personal than people often follow. When God wanted to form the human race, He began with a man and a woman, Adam and Eve. When God wanted to make a nation, He chose and adopted Abraham as His own. When God wanted a king to rule that nation, He selected David, the 8th son and the least important of Jesse’s clan. When God brought His Son into the world, He did not have that Son born in a palace or born to a military champion or to a business magnate.

Jesus’ humble beginnings tell us a lot about His style of ministry. He would not win people over by force of arms or by treaty or by economic power. He called people to trust in Him, and in that life of faith they found what they really needed. He promised them forgiveness, hope, peace, and a life that would have no end. Faith in Christ makes great optimists. Over in Burma, Judson was lying in a foul jail with 32 lbs. of chains on his ankles, his feet bound to a bamboo pole. A fellow prisoner said, “Dr. Judson, what about the prospect of the conversion of the heathen?”, with a sneer on his face. His instant reply was, “The prospects are just as bright as the promises of God.” (*The Presbyterian Advance*)

Paul put it this way, writing to the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:9): “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Made rich by Christ’s poverty – what a strange way to save a world! And yet this is God’s way, the best way. By Him who is the Way we are made brothers and sisters of the Messiah, Jesus.

Bernard of Clairvaux put it this way: “Behold the Lamb without spot, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world! Who could better take them away than He who knew no sin? He, indeed, can cleanse me, who has never Himself been defiled. His touch can remove the clay from my eyes, for His hand is free from the lightest dust. He can take the mote from out of my eye who has no beam in His own; or rather, He who has no smallest grain of dust in His own eye can take the beam from mine. . . The poverty of Christ is greater riches than all this world’s wealth, for what is richer or more precious than the humility by which heaven is bought and Divine grace is obtained?” (*Lutheran Witness*, Dec 2016, pp. 12-13)

Our Lord works His salvation even through the way that leads to the cross. Jesus drank the cup of suffering and rejection to its very last drop, and because He humbled Himself so incredibly, we are brought into God’s favor. Now when we suffer and go through trials, we can place ourselves into our Lord’s hands and trust Him to do just what is needed to sharpen us, to strengthen our faith, and to bring us to His eternal kingdom.

David, a 2-year old with leukemia, was taken by his mother to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, to see Dr. John Truman who specializes in treating children with cancer and various blood diseases. Dr. Truman’s prognosis was devastating: “He has a 50-50 chance.” The countless clinic visits, the blood tests, the intravenous drugs, the fear and pain – the mother’s ordeal can be almost as bad as the child’s because she must stand by, unable to bear the pain herself. David never cried in the waiting room, and although his friends in the clinic had to hurt him and stick needles in him, he hustled in ahead of his mother with a smile, sure of the welcome he always got. When he was three, David had to have a spinal tap, a painful procedure at any age. It was explained to him that, because he was sick, Dr. Truman had to do something to make him better. “If it hurts, remember it’s because he loves you,” David’s mother told him. The procedure was horrendous. It took three nurses to hold David still, while he yelled and sobbed and struggled. When it was almost over, the tiny boy, soaked in sweat and tears, looked up at the doctor and gasped, “Thank you, Dr. Tooman, for my hurting.” (Monica Dickens, *Miracles of Courage*, 1985)

Can we speak such words of confidence and trust to our Lord? “Thank You, my Savior, for my hurting? I know that it is worked by You into Your good plans for me and for all Your people.” At the very end of His ministry, at the very end of His suffering, at the very end of His life, Jesus entrusted Himself to the Father: “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.” By His willing offering of Himself into death, He has pledged that our lives also have worth and meaning forever.

Conclusion: Our Lord works His magnificent salvation for the world through a Jewish-born child of no significance except by God’s doing. To quote Bernard of Clairvaux again: “Oh, how wonderfully keen is the eye of faith! It knows the Son of God hanging on the cross, pierced with nails; it recognizes Him even in death, and here, in Bethlehem, it believes and confesses Him to be God, though a helpless Infant in the manger.” God’s ways are not our ways. We can be grateful for that. For in His own way, our God has worked out a salvation that is totally effective, through His own Son’s birth, life, death and resurrection. Trust in the Lord Jesus, and know that your life matters forever. In Jesus’ name, AMEN!