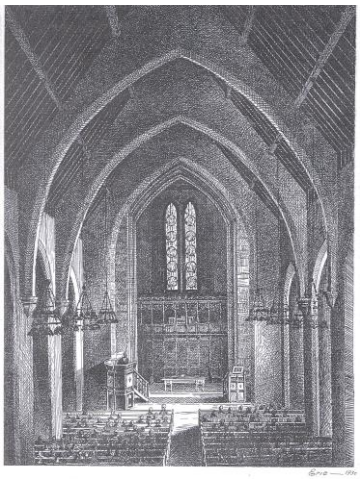

Change of Heart

Isaiah 7:10-16 & Matthew 1:18-25
Advent 4 - December 21, 2025
Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

Today's gospel passage depicts an amazing change of heart in one person, caused by the presence of God in this his world. Really, this is the story of all our encounters with the holy in this life; with all the interchanges that occur between the great God of love and grace and his children in this world. This is the story of Joseph and his encounter with the possibility of a baby.

William Willimon, retired Methodist bishop, tells a great story about one of his parishioners:

He had interpreted and kept his marriage vows rather loosely, had thought little about his past, and had not the slightest interest in the future. He had spent the first years of marriage mainly on the road making money.

"But one night," he said, "I got turned around. That was the night I walked into the hospital room and held my little baby in my arms for the first time and realized that she was part of me even if she was better than I deserved. I said to myself, 'You're going to have to stop your foolishness and start living like somebody, because she's somebody.'"

Joseph, in a bit of a different way and certainly in a different place and time, was like this man … he too knew what he needed to do in this world. Quite unlike the parishioner in Dr. Willimon's illustration, Joseph was a man that the scriptures call 'righteous,' meaning that he always did the right things in the eyes of God. He was among the best of the best and he knew, without hesitation, in almost every instance, what the right thing to do was. Without question, he followed God's law.

Here's one who requires a visitation of an angelic dream to change his heart. Here's one who is fairly well convinced about what is the "right thing" to do about his young fiancée's troubling and mysterious pregnancy. He knows the rules of his faith; he understands without a doubt the implications of his bride's condition: adultery.

Joseph was a man of faith and a man of the world. He understood what the pregnancy of a betrothed woman meant: it was either his child or another man's. That's just the way the world worked, and he also knew what that meant for him by the commandments of his faith. Yet, he was also a compassionate man who decided to "put her away quietly." In other words, the marriage would be off, but he would do what he could to mitigate any embarrassment to her and to her family.

So, here's this great faithful man confronted by a visitation of an angel with different news than he would have expected. He had been raised in his father's faith, and he thought for sure he knew what God would have him do. And surprise! The very thing that God would have him do was not what his faith had told him to do! Joseph needed to change his mind about this because God was doing something new and different; something wholly unexpected and beautiful indeed.

I imagine a scene the next morning in Joseph's kitchen. He's sitting down to a nice cup of coffee, puzzling over the dreams of the night, wondering about what he would do next. On the one hand are the commandments and clear word of his faith in these matters; on the other hand is the voice of God through the nocturnal visit of the angel. What should he do? He stands up, removes the old, yellowed magnet from his refrigerator that clearly read: "The Torah says it, I believe it, that settles it." and replaces it with a new magnet reading: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

Now, I know that that imagery is a bit fanciful: Joseph didn't drink coffee, have a refrigerator or possess any magnets, but the intent is the same: we, like Joseph, need to be sensitive to the times when God is attempting to change our minds about this or that. If we're conscious of it, it probably happens a lot more than we really realize.

This is also the power of scripture in our lives. When we read or hear those old familiar words with an open heart and mind, we might find God doing something radically different than we would have expected or anticipated before. This is the message of Christmas.

This is why Joseph and this little, isolated story from the Gospel of Matthew is so important. Without the ability to change his mind, influenced by a divine visit, the world would have been a different place indeed. The story of Jesus' birth would have been radically different if Joseph had not allowed himself to see with new eyes and think about things differently than he had in the past.

Here's where we enter the story again … can we not put ourselves in the place of Joseph? How many times has God changed our mind about something that we firmly believed and held to be God's truth for us? Do not Christmas and the scripture that we read and the Spirit that lives in our midst have the power to change our minds? Of course they all do …

So, as this season of Advent draws to a close and the glorious celebration of Christmas and the birth of our Savior looms large in its place, it would be best for us all to imitate Joseph just a bit … being sensitive to the movement of God's spirit in our midst, the place of Jesus Christ in our hearts and minds, and willing to change our minds and see the world anew, from a different position.

Of course, this has been the plan of God from before the beginning of all this – in this God demonstrates God's forethought. Some would like to envision the coming of Christ as God's great correction program – God had tried so many things to correct the consequences of humanity's sinful hearts and actions and had failed so many times. There was Noah and his ark, wiping out the entire population of the known world and starting over and that didn't work. There was the law given to the people of Israel to guide their thinking and their lives and, according to this rather mistaken theory, that didn't work after a while … there were the prophets sent to Israel and the kings and the priests and that whole truckload of failed programs. So, according to this way of thinking, God scratching his head devises that he will take the extreme step to send his Son and thus we get Christmas.

This way of thinking, as popular as it may be, is just dead wrong. The incarnation, God coming to us as a baby born in a lowly place at just the seemingly wrong time, was the plan all along – it was God's great forethought to provide a way home for his wandering children even before he created those children back in a garden far away and a long time ago. This was God's plan and Joseph just had to get his heart around to it because it didn't follow the acceptable patterns at all.

So where is it in your life that the entrance of this divine child once again in the world might work a little Christmas magic and turn you just a bit? Where is that you have become stuck in your prejudices and your pre-judgments of others, in your vague yet distinctly your own keeping yourself at bay from "those people" whomever "those people" might be in your personal lexicon of offenses and deeply-held grudges against others.

It's like that parishioner of William Willimon that I mentioned earlier in the sermon said:

"But one night," he said, "I got turned around. That was the night I walked into the hospital room and held my little baby in my arms for the first time and realized that she was part of me even if she was better than I deserved. I said to myself, 'You're going to have to stop your foolishness and start living like somebody, because she's somebody.'"

In a like way, the birth of this baby, this infant who is indeed Emmanuel (God with us), calls us to start living like somebody, precisely because this baby, this God-for-us IS the Somebody who does hold the power to change us, alter us, and make us what we could never make of ourselves even if we kept every commandment and obeyed every law – the people of God.