

***Unwrapping Advent***  
***"Love – It's what I always wanted!"***  
December 20, 2020

**Overarching theme:** In 2020, FUMC will be a **GO** church!

**Instructions:**

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

**Core Point:**

The past is the past. There is nothing that can be done about it. The past can only be used to gain wisdom for the future. What can change is the future. When we, as God's people, are willing to follow God in our daily lives, God will make a good way in the future. The way may be bumpy at times and have curves, but the process will be filled with God's love and grace.

**Matthew:**

The overarching theme of the Gospel of Matthew is the role of Jesus as the Christ in relation to God's plan of salvation for all humanity. Toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, after the destruction of the temple, Judaism itself was in the process of being reshaped. During this time, Matthew redefined what it means to be God's people as those who share a common ancestry with the historic nation of Israel and also participate in the new way made available through "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1) and the ruler of the universe (Matt 28:18).

Jesus was born in the house of the royal Davidic dynasty, in a family that reaches back to Abraham. His conception by the Holy Spirit set him apart from ordinary humans, and words or prophecy declare him as the one who will save his people. His public life begins with his baptism by John, after which a heavenly voice presents him as God's Son, whom God dearly loves. He proclaims the kingdom of heaven, performs miracles, and teaches his followers what it means to be righteous and how to enter God's kingdom. Above all, Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is the authoritative interpreter of the Jewish scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament. He fulfilled the Torah and the Prophets by teaching how they express God's will and by living out God's will in his own life and ministry. Jesus identified and exposed evil at work in the religious, political, and social structures of his time. By doing so, he became an enemy of the religious establishment and the Roman Empire. This ultimately led to his arrest and trial by the Jewish leadership and then to his being sentenced to death and executed by the Roman military authority. The

story ends with the resurrected Jesus encountering first Mary Magdalene and another Mary and then the 11 disciples, telling them to go to all the nations to make disciples, baptize them and teach the good news.

-Common English Study Bible, NT pp 3-4

### **Reflect on these Scriptures:**

Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV *Jesus the Messiah<sup>[a]</sup> took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;<sup>[b]</sup> and he named him Jesus.*

### **Commentary:**

When the narrative curtain of Matthew 1:18 opens, the reader learns from the narrator that some things have already occurred: (a) Mary and Joseph are already engaged. This was a binding arrangement between people already legally considered husband (v. 19) and wife (v. 20), so that unfaithfulness was considered adultery, and could be dissolved only by death or divorce (1:19). (b) Mary is already pregnant. The reader learns in v. 18 that conception is from the Holy Spirit; Joseph does not learn of it until v. 20, from the angel. "Found" in v. 18 does not have the tone of an expose', but simply means "was." There are no novelistic dimensions to the story, the action of which has not yet begun. The narrator is bringing the reader up to date on the situation that obtained when the action of the story begins in v.20. (c) Joseph has already become aware of Mary's pregnancy, but does not know its divine source.

The Law of Moses required capital punishment in such cases (Deut 22:23-27). By Matthew's time, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating. The first and only thing said about Joseph's character is that he is "righteous", a key word in Matthew's theology, which can also be translated "just." In Matthew's setting, to be *dikaios* means to live by the law, God's revealed will. (d) Joseph, contrary to the behavior expected of one who is *dikaios*

had already decided not to go by the letter of the law, but chose out of consideration for Mary to divorce her quietly.

Here the focus is on the angel's (God's) action. All of the above had already transpired by the time the story opens. After Joseph had decided on his course of action, the first action plotted in the story occurs, and it is an act of God, who sends an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream. The angel's only action is to speak. The first words uttered are typical of angelic revelations, "Do not be afraid" (v. 20; cf. Gen 21:17; Matt 28:5; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; Rev 1:17). The divine message is, in effect, "Do not hesitate to take Mary as your wife." The angel gives an explanation for Mary's pregnancy, announcing the divine act that has already occurred. Based on this, a command follows: "*You shall name the child, accepting him as your own and adopting him into the Davidic line as an authentic 'son of David.'*" "

The child is to be named Jesus, Matthew's Greek for *Yesua*, a shortened form of *Yehosua*. These are all forms of the English name *Joshua*, which appeared as (*Isous*, "Jesus"). This Joshua/Yeshua/Jesus was the successor to Moses' authority (Num 27:12-23; Deut 31:7-23; Josh 1:5-9). The fact that Jesus inherits and fulfills Moses' role will be an important theme of Matthew's story. The repeated refrain in the story of Joshua, "I (God) will be with you" (e.g., Josh 1:9), is also an important Matthean motif that relates the biblical Joshua/Yeshua to his New Testament namesake (cf. 1:23).

- adapted from the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VIII p. 134

### **This week - "*Love - It's what I always wanted!*"**

Joseph is faced with an excruciating dilemma. As a faithful, observant Jew, how should he, a righteous man, respond to this law-breaking, heart-breaking news of pre-marriage pregnancy? After a few doubtless sleepless nights, Joseph finally comes up with a way to resolve this living nightmare and return his life to some vestige of normalcy. He will break off his engagement with Mary quietly, hoping that this will help her avoid some of the more extreme consequences of her legal disobedience. But just as he came to peace about this matter, an Angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, calling him to a path that transcends his natural fears into an adventure of *Agape* (unconditional love) with Mary and her child. If he is willing to unwrap this gift, Joseph would raise the child as his own, naming him Jesus for Old Testament Joshua, who led the people where lawgiver Moses could not - the Promise Land. Jesus would be God's gift of Agape love to the world, "God with us," offering a "Promise Land" life transformation for all who would be willing to unwrap his gift.

How would Joseph respond to this great dream? Would he wake up and unwrap the gift, or would he hit the proverbial snooze bar and continue a pursuit of normalcy in Nazareth? Joseph's decision to unwrap is an example for us. While we don't face the same dilemma details as Joseph, we, too, face a nightmarish season of our own. Our temptation may be to simply seek a return to some normalcy, while God might be dreaming up something more – perhaps an Agape adventure – for those willing to reject the snooze bar and wake up and unwrap the gift.

### **Questions to Ponder for accountability in the group:**

As you think about this passage, how can you respond to this Scripture?

1. Matthew describes Joseph as a 'righteous' man. Scholars believe that means that he was very observant to the law and moral guidelines of Judaism. What do you think was going on inside of him when he first learned of this nightmarish scenario – that his fiancé Mary was pregnant (evidently in disregard to the Law of Moses)? What do you think of his resolution to dissolve their engagement quietly (hopefully saving her from public shunning and punishment)?
2. What do you think was going on in Joseph immediately after the Angelic visitation in a dream? Do you think he had a choice in how to respond to the dream? Why or why not?
3. Instead of settling for a conventional path ('return to normal' life), Joseph opted for God's dream of unwrapping an Agape Adventure with Mary and her child. What kind of faith and courage did that take?
4. As you consider your own journey in this unprecedented season, what Agape dream might God have for you, your family, and this church family beyond a 'return to normal?' In other words, could 2021 also offer an opportunity for a spiritual reset for those willing to unwrap this gift? What would that 'unwrapping' look like for you?

### **Activity for the life of a disciple:**

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMC.
2. Ponder and pray on this Scripture this week: Matthew 1:20-21 NRSV  
*<sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*
3. As you think about potential New Year's resolutions, spend some time prayerfully discerning what God might be calling you to unwrap in 2021.