“Love Revealed”

Matthew 1:18-25

 “Love and marriage love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage. This I tell you brother, you can’t have one without the other.”

 Or at least that’s what Frank Sinatra sang, using the words of Sammy Cahn and the music of Jimmy Van Heusen.

 But we sometimes forget how modern an idea that is. Oh sure, we’ve been talking about both love and marriage for as long as humans have been writing songs and stories, but the truth is, for a lot of history they haven’t really been all that closely related – or at least not in the order we have the today.

 We talk about people “falling in love” and getting married – but for thousands of years marriage was more a marker of adulthood and responsibility than anything else. It was also too vital an economic and political institution to be entered into solely on the basis of something as irrational and fleeting as love.

 I suspect a lot of you have seen “Fiddler on the Roof” - either the movie or on stage one of the thousands of times it has been produced. One of the most popular songs in the show is “Matchmaker” – Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match,” Tevye’s daughters sing it – laying out their dreams for the perfect, wise, kind, and of course handsome man that they want to marry some day.

 Except according to the traditions of their time and place – and the traditions of the time and place that Mary and Joseph lived in – they won’t have much choice at all.

 Oh, Joseph might. I don’t know if you caught what was going on in Fiddler, but if you see it again, take note: The matchmaker is paid by the groom – or in other cases the groom’s family. In the movie Lazar Wulf – the butcher – was lonely, and he like Tevye’s daughter, so he paid Yente to find him a match – to basically start a negotiation for him. The final decision was made by the bride’s parents – ultimately the father. And how did they decide? Based on the kind of life they felt the man could provide their daughter.

 That wasn’t just Jewish custom, mind you – for most of history that was the way most marriages happened in most of the world. In some places it still is.

 So when Matthew tells us that Mary is engaged to Joseph what he means is that Joseph has struck an agreement with Mary’s parents that they will be married. Love likely has little to do with it.

 In the ancient world even in cultures that claimed to value married love, couples were expected to keep it under strict control. Fun historical face - A Roman Senator was once expelled from the Senate because: he had kissed his wife in front of his daughter. I mean how could he - everyone knew it was disgraceful to kiss one’s wife in public.

 Centuries later Christian theologians of the middle ages argued that husbands and wives who loved each other too much were committing the sin of idolatry. They were especially critical of wives who used endearing nicknames for their husbands because such familiarity on a wife’s part undermined the husband’s authority and the awe that his wife should feel for him.

 That may well be the kind of marriage that Joseph was expecting to enter into with Mary.

 Except things went wrong. Mary became pregnant.

 And Matthew tells us that Joseph is “a righteous man” – in Hebrew the world would probably be “Tzadik”. Now if you look up the word Tzadik” today you will read all kind of things about the Kabbala tradition and how a Tzadik is a spiritual master – a wise teacher – but that all developed long after Joseph’s time.

 In Joseph’s time a “Tzadik” was defined by faithfulness to the law. A Tzadik kept the law. That’s what makes what happens next so striking. You see, the law is very clear about this issue. Deuteronomy, chapter 22 - If a man takes a wife and finds out that she isn’t a virgin “the cities elders bring the young woman to the door of her father’s house. The citizens of that city MUST stone her until she dies because she acted so sinfully in Israel by having extramarital sex while still in her father’s house.”

 That’s the law. That is the righteous thing to do.

 But Joseph is also a compassionate man. He may or may not “love” Mary in a romantic sense, but he doesn’t want to humiliate her. So he will divorce her quietly – probably in this case meaning he will tear up the agreement he signed with her father or older brother or whoever the adult male was in her life that he had negotiated with, and she will go back to living at home.

 She’ll still be humiliated, of course – she is a pregnant and single. But Joseph won’t be adding to it. He will be quietly washing his hands of the whole situation and leaving Mary to her fate. It’s not much, but it’s the best he can do. And even though it is a violation of the law, it is what Joseph resolves to do.

 But then he has a dream. And in the dream he hears a message from God. When we hear this scripture read we get hung up on the word “angel” – we picture brights lights and halos and wings and flowing white robes – but all of those pictures were painted later. Truth is, angel just means messenger. So Joseph gets a message.

 He gets THE message – the one that God keeps telling God’s people again and again throughout scripture: Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Don’t be afraid to face the scorn of your neighbors, their gossip and their suspicion. Don’t be afraid to raise this child. This child is God’s child. This child will save God’s people.

 And then Matthew quotes from the passage from Isaiah. Isaiah was talking to Ahaz, Judah’s king. Jerusalem was surrounded, Ahaz is being pressured to join Edom and Israel in a foolhardy attack on Assyria. Isaiah tells him no, don’t, but Ahaz is wavering, he can’t decide what to do. Isaiah keeps telling Ahaz, telling all the people, to keep the faith, that God would intervene and save them. But they kept doubting, paralyzed with fear. So Isaiah gets frustrated, he basically says to Ahaz “What do I have to tell you people to make you hear – what kind of sign do you want from God to prove what I’m saying is true? – Ask for it – it will happen.”

 But Ahaz is so afraid he won’t even ask for a sign. So Isaiah says you won’t even ask for a sign? Fine. But God will give you one anyway…

 A young woman (that’s what the text actually says in Hebrew – just that the woman is young, nothing else) will conceive, and by the time she gives birth to a son, everything will be different. She will be so convinced of God’s presence that she’ll call him Emmanuel, God with us. He won’t starve – he’ll eat rich, delicious foods - butter and honey. He’ll learn God’s law and keep God’s way. Because all these enemies you’re worried about now – they’ll be gone. But God will remain with you.

 Notice the similarity between the struggle Judah faced and the one Joseph was facing? Matthew did. So he pointed it out to everyone who would read his gospel: Hang on – don’t be afraid – God will be with you. That sign Ahaz didn’t ask for but got anyway? Here it is again.

 God’s sign is a child. A child that will need a father in his day-to-day life – will need to be loved and cared for. And Joseph resolves to be that father.

 Despite the rumors that will undoubtedly come – even if they rushed the wedding celebration I’m sure someone in their village noticed that Mary’s pregnancy seemed a little TOO advanced for the circumstances. It’s probably not a coincidence that later on we hear people who question Jesus’ ministry refer to him as “The Son of Mary”. Yes, it might mean that Joseph has died by then, but I hope I don’t shock you too badly by saying it could also be a way of saying – “After all, we really don’t know who his father really was, do we?”

 We don’t know much about Joseph at all, really. We hear about two times he takes Jesus to the Temple – once as an infant, and later as a precocious pre-teen. We get hints that he and Mary had other children, the brothers and sisters of Jesus that get mentioned later in the gospels. That is it, that’s all we know.

 That and one other thing: Joseph was a man who trusted God’s promise, who trusted God’s love.

 And because Joseph trusted that love, he was able to live out of faith, and not fear. Even when it likely meant that his neighbors might snicker behind his back, or give him disapproving glances. Even when it meant breaking – or at least bending – the religious law that had guided him his entire life. Love mattered more to him. Maybe his love for Mary, but certainly his love for God.

 Joseph took Mary as his wife. He waited with her, for the baby to be born. He travelled with her, to Egypt after the birth. He returned to Nazareth with her and helped to raise Jesus as his son. We don’t know what his emotions toward Mary were – we don’t know if they felt romantic love for one another in the sense that we would understand it today.

 But he demonstrated a deeper love – love that recognized the power of God at work in her life and supported her in bringing that power fully to birth. Joseph probably didn’t dream of starting his marriage by raising a child that was not his own. But he sacrifices his dream for a bigger dream – God’s dream – just as the child he will help raise will offer himself up as a sacrifice for the world.

 In protestant circles we talk a lot about having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”, about our personal salvation, about what Jesus can mean to our individual lives. That is all vitally important.

 But I can’t help but wonder if this passage from Isaiah, and the way ­­Matthew uses it to tell us who Jesus is – doesn’t contain an equally important message. Emmanual – God is with US. Not with you, not with Me – with US.

 I can’t help but wonder if it isn’t meant to remind us of who we are called to be—people in community, with God. Not just people who believe the right things about God, and follow all the right rules, avoid all the key mistakes, but people who love as God loves, steadfastly, without condition. People oriented toward others, willing to make sacrifices for others, because of God. People who truly believe God is present in a unique and powerful way when even just two of us are gathered. Our human tendency is to focus on ourselves; to succumb to the sin of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-importance. But this is not we are supposed to be.

 And it’s also God WITH us, not God FOR us. The fact that God is with us does not in any way mean God is less present with others. In fact when we start to turn away from others, when we turn away from those who are not like us, from those who need us, when we turn away from accountability and responsibility for our neighbor – we may find we are turning away from God.

 Even if we think we’re doing it for the right reasons – to keep ourselves from associating with people and things that we think are displeasing to God – it’s still dangerous. We may think we’re avoiding darkness, keeping ourselves safe from sin, but we know perfectly well that darkness and sin isn’t going away. It will still be there no matter where we turn. It will still be just below the surface – even inside us.

 And the only thing that can truly bring light to darkness is love. Love that seeks to find God’s presence not just in our own hearts, our own individual lives – but in the lives we share with others – those we know, and those we don’t. Our friends, our neighbors, the people we pass by on the street, the people whose faces we see in the news. That’s the love that was revealed to us, embodied, in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel.

 In other words, “God with us” is both promise and possibility; both presence and potential. “God with us” means that we are not alone. We are never alone. We are never apart from God and we are never apart from each other.

 The darkness is not going away, and perhaps that realization is what makes this season so difficult for so many. The coming of Christmas is its own miracle but cannot miraculously remove that for which we as humans have no cure—which is why God became flesh in the first place.

 The darkness continues. But *together*, even, this year, at a distance, we worship, we light candles, we share cards, we give gifts, and we celebrate—all of which help us see the sign of love so easily overlooked when we are alone. The sign that is both our certain hope and the hope to which we defiantly witness: “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”

 God is with us. Thanks be to God. AMEN