

Sermon: Surprise Salvation  
4 Advent, Year B  
Matthew 1:18-25

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Joseph – for once we get to focus on Joseph, the man who has such a strange role in Jesus’ birth story. Joseph is engaged to Mary, maybe pretty excited about the marriage that is to come, and then discovers the crushing news that she is already pregnant. Things certainly aren’t going as planned. While the writer Matthew doesn’t reveal much about Joseph’s emotional state, we can imagine he is deeply disappointed, possibly crushed by this news. But we hear that “Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly,” one of his more humane legal options. It was the best he could do. For Joseph this pregnancy of an unmarried woman was a violation of social convention and ethics. He was between a rock and hard place. But in a dream, God intervenes and tells him, “Don’t be afraid to take her as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you will call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

It is witness to both a scandal and a wonder. God’s work has come through a huge surprise.

I want to share an abbreviated version of a story I heard last week on NPR. A woman has fallen about as low as she can go. She said she’d come from a place of privilege – her parents had given her more than she needed - love, attention, a fine education but she had become addicted to drugs and as a result made a series of choices that weren’t good. One day she finds herself curled up in a fetal position on the floor, knowing she’s got to do something. She knows she needs help. She takes out the piece of paper that is folded up in her jeans pocket, the paper she has unfolded and then folded back up so many times before. But this time she realizes she’s going to call the number on it. Her mother had given her the number for a Christian counselor long ago and had said, “Call this man when you want to talk to someone.” So it’s 1:00 in the a.m., she calls the number. A man answers, she hears him moving the bed covers around so he can sit up. He says, “What can I do for you?” And she starts to unload. She starts talking and he starts listening, and it goes on until day break. She says she’s feeling the “peace that passes understanding”, an amazing gift she hasn’t experienced in a very long time. She finally says, “I should let you go but aren’t you gonna tell me to read some Bible verses or pray or something?” “I can do that.” He says, “But I need you to listen carefully and PROMISE me you won’t get upset.” And she says, “What?” And he says to her, “You called the wrong number.”

She was witness to both a scandal and a wonder. God’s work has come through a huge surprise.

Just as Jesus came to us in human form to save us from ourselves, sometimes God comes to us in human form to save us, to help us, to intervene – often out of the blue, often through scandalous wonder.

As we move into our 5 minutes of silence, as we continue our Advent practice, I wonder if we can meditate on the following:

How has God helped you recently through the intervention of another human being? Maybe someone listened to you without judgment when you really needed to talk. Maybe someone helped you financially when you were broke. Maybe someone lifted your load at work or at home. Maybe someone reminded you of just how precious you really are when you were feeling pretty rotten. As we watch for the birth of Christ, the coming of God into the world, can you ponder the question: How have you been saved by another?