

**+ Matthew 1:18-25 + Prepare the Way for Immanuel<sup>1</sup> + 4th Sunday in Advent + 22 December 2013 +**

Only a week or so ago the Lord covered our region in nearly a foot of snow. As the snow fell, a welcome sight showed up on the roads. Heavy-duty, full-sized snowplows with double blades pushed through the snow on highways and back streets. The plows cleared the way to make the roads passable for vehicles. Even as the snow kept coming, the plows kept clearing the way, throwing the snow on tall piles off the road. When the snow stopped, the way was clear, because the plows had cleared the way.

As the last of the snow melts with the rain, we make our final Advent preparations for the celebration of our Savior's birth. We sing familiar Advent hymns like, "Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel", in anticipation of the familiar Christmas carols we'll belt out later this week. We've prepared our church and our homes for Christmas. The decorations are up. The presents are mostly bought. The menus are nearly planned, and the worship services are ready with just a little more practice needed.

On the checklist of your Christmas preparations, however, did you remember to prepare your heart? Yes, this Advent season we've prepared the way for the Lord. We've prepared for the unexpected. We've prepared with repentance. We've prepared for the good news, but has the snowplow of God's Word cleared the way for Immanuel through your heart? Thankfully this morning, the Lord **PREPARES THE WAY FOR IMMANUEL**.

In God's Word, we have plenty of descriptions of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We first hear how a young virgin named Mary trusted her Lord and obeyed his will to be the mother of her Savior. We hear in Luke 2 how Mary pondered everything that happened. We see Mary at the wedding in Cana, and when she came to get Jesus because the family thought he was losing his mind. Later we see Mary at the foot of the cross watching her son die and understanding what Simeon meant when he prophesied that a sword would pierce her heart too. There's plenty written about Mary, but what about Jesus' earthly father? What do we know about Joseph?

Joseph was a poor, yet respected carpenter in the Galilean backwater of Nazareth. His life wouldn't merit a blip on history's page. His parents had taught him well about God's promises in the Old Testament, especially those of the prophet Isaiah. From little on, Joseph knew about the Messiah who would come to save his people from their sins—a Savior whom his people had longed to see for centuries. Joseph knew he was descended from the royal line of King David—through whose line the Savior would come. Like so many others before him, Joseph longed to see his Savior.

Joseph was also **"pledged to be married"** to a young virgin named Mary. Their two families had come together and discussed a marriage. After negotiations were complete, Joseph and Mary signed a contract for the bride price and the conditions of their marriage. They were then regarded as husband and wife in Nazareth, but the actual marriage celebration would not follow until a year after the arrangement. This would allow the family time to prepare everything needed for a marriage. Then their married life would begin when Joseph welcomed Mary into his home.

Before this final step in the marriage process could happen, though, Joseph received some disturbing news that turned his world upside-down. **"[Mary] was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."** Shock and pain and disappointment like he had never felt before filled his heart as he tried to find out the truth. If Mary had committed the serious sin of adultery, according to Mosaic Law, she could be publicly disgraced and even stoned to death. That she had become pregnant by the Holy Spirit didn't even register with Joseph. He wasn't ready to believe that this unborn child was actually the promised Messiah. He simply wanted to know the truth.

Joseph **"was a righteous man"**, and he was greatly concerned about his wife. Because he cared so much for Mary, Joseph **"did not want to expose her to public disgrace..."** So he planned to legally end his marriage hoping to minimize her disgrace and maintain a godly life himself. **"He had in mind to divorce her quietly."** To do so would've broken their marriage vows, but it would've prevented Mary from great disgrace and even death. She still would have to deliver and raise the child on her own—since no one knew who the father was. Conception by the Holy Spirit wasn't even a possibility. Joseph could continue his life as a poor carpenter and perhaps marry again someday.

As righteous as Joseph's plans seemed, he didn't realize he was putting himself in the way of the Lord. In spite of Joseph's good intentions, he didn't realize he was blocking the way of the coming Savior. By his actions, Joseph would've abandoned Jesus before his birth and would've legally made the child illegitimate without a

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thoughts of this sermon were received with thanks from Rev. Thomas Gumm.

father. Joseph's heart wasn't ready for Immanuel. God himself had to clear the way for Joseph to trust that the Lord was accomplishing a great miracle inside Mary.

As Christmas nears, you and I need to take a close look at our hearts too. Amidst all your other preparations, have you forgotten to prepare your heart? Like the piling snow, what obstacles are piling up in your heart? Wrong priorities? Misdirected intentions? Materialism or even greed? Self-centeredness? Worry? Fear? Grief? A lazy spirit? A desire to just "get through Christmas"?

You and I need to take a long, hard look at the growing piles of obstacles in our hearts. You need to consider if you've put yourself in the Lord's way. Have you, like Joseph, unintentionally blocked the way of the Savior with your own intentions? Have you let the preparation of your heart get pushed aside as you decorate your home and wrap the presents and keep up with a busy schedule? It's so easy to proclaim the familiar good news of Christ's birth that you often end up just making it a routine part of your Christmas traditions.

Sadly you and I must confess that as we rush towards Christmas, we have failed to clear the way for the Lord or at best, it's been a lackluster effort. In fact, by nature none of us could ever totally clear the way for the coming Christ. By nature, we would prefer to keep piling the obstacles higher and higher, yet those piles threaten to completely overwhelm us under their impossible weight. Even more so, God's Law crushes us when we realize how completely unprepared for Christ's coming we really are. As we watch and wait for the Savior's coming, God's Law breaks down the obstacles of our hearts so God's good news can open the way for Christ into our hearts.

Perhaps it was the night before Joseph was going to divorce Mary when the Lord prepared the way for Immanuel's coming. Either way, **"an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream"**. The angel had a special message from God himself. **"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."** Through that message, the Lord immediately cleared away all of Joseph's doubts about Mary's faithfulness. The Lord made Joseph realize what he had always longed to hear—the promised Messiah was coming. By marrying Mary, Joseph would become the legal father of her son—making Jesus legitimate according to the Law. Joseph would also take on her disgrace as neighbors and friends wondered why he married her if he wasn't obligated to do so. Joseph would have the privilege of delivering the Messiah, naming the Messiah, and raising the Messiah. This faithful Old Testament believer was ecstatic—suddenly filled with hope and excitement for the birth of his soon-to-be adopted Son.

Now Matthew points out that this child, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, would be the fulfillment of a prophecy Isaiah made 750 years before. **"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means 'God with us.'"** Joseph realized this child would be the visible God in human flesh and would make his dwelling in a sinful world to save sinful humanity. Immanuel was coming, and Joseph was finally prepared to usher him into this world.

The Lord prepared the way through Joseph's heart for the coming Christ. How else could Joseph respond than with a heart filled with trust in the Lord's promise? Immediately after he woke up from his dream, Joseph **"did what the angel of the Lord had commanded and took Mary home as his wife."** Joseph didn't hesitate. He wasn't going to stand in the Lord's way anymore. He knew Isaiah's promise and therefore had no sexual relations with his wife until after Jesus' birth. There would be no doubt whose son Jesus was—the Son of God. At the child's birth, Joseph obeyed the Lord once again **"and...gave him the name Jesus."** Imagine how Joseph celebrated as he held "God with us" in his arms and sang sweet lullabies to his Savior. God himself had prepared the way for the coming of Immanuel!

God does the same for you and me. He doesn't send divine messages through angels or make appearances in our dreams, but he clears the way for Immanuel through the good news of his Word. In a few moments, we'll sing, "Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel" and soon we'll hear and see and proclaim his coming in the flesh among us, the coming of a Child born to save. That good news will prepare our hearts and minds for Immanuel.

That good news will carry us from the Savior's manger bed out to the dusty roads of Palestine and up a dark path to a cross on a lonely hillside outside of Jerusalem. Behind that manger stuffed with hay is the shadow of the cross and Christ's sacrifice to save us from our sins. On the shoulders of the One who will hang on that cross will pile up all the obstacles of our hearts—the wrong priorities, the misguided intentions, the materialism and the greed, the fear, the worry, the grief, the laziness and the lack of care, everything that blocks the Lord

from preparing our hearts. Like snow piles pushed aside, those sins will stay pushed aside on his shoulders and disappear forever in the forgiveness of “God with us”. Then three days later the greatest news of all will clear the way through our hearts and minds—“Christ is risen! Death is conquered! The way to heaven is open and ours!”

Oh, that the Lord would clear the way through our hearts with the double blades of his Law and Gospel, as he did for Joseph! Oh, that we would be like Joseph and leave today with hearts prepared to celebrate Christ’s coming—eager to daily and joyfully do God’s will with the Lord and his Word our highest priorities even in this busy Christmas season!

From hearts cleared by the Word, then, let’s sing those old familiar hymns! Let’s proclaim with all our might the good news of the Child who came to save us! Let’s celebrate the first coming of our King! Let’s cherish his present coming through Word and Sacrament, and finally let’s long for his coming again! Let’s rejoice, for Immanuel is coming soon! He has cleared the way to heaven for us, and it will never close again! Amen.