

Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

This week held two events in the McCurry house: My son Peter turned 17 months old; and we put up our Christmas tree. When the two met, it was very entertaining. On Friday, Peter had laid down to take a nap. When he woke up, the tree was transformed with shine and color. How that dramatic change happened is still probably a mystery to him. It was new creation, happening right in our living room!

The four gospel writers each tell the story of Jesus a bit differently. For Matthew, the news of Jesus' coming birth was a wonder-filled event of new creation. The book of Matthew begins with, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." (*Mt 1:1*) The original word hiding under "genealogy" is "genesis". From the beginning, the book of *Matthew* is hearkening back to God's creation, back in the *real* beginning.



Our passage today starts similarly. "Now the birth (or genesis) of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." (*1:18*) Apparently Joseph had already learned that Mary, his fiancé, was pregnant, even though he could not be the father. Joseph was a "righteous man." (*1:19*) He cared about God, including God's mercy and justice. He had already decided to "dismiss" or divorce Mary quietly. That's because there were big consequences for a woman who was pregnant by a man she was not engaged to. The engaged man, wronged by infidelity in his future spouse, would make the accusation public. The punishment was that the woman, and the man who

fathered her child, would be killed by stoning. This is the public disgrace that Joseph wanted to avoid, by dismissing Mary quietly. He had thought through the whole situation. Joseph planned to protect her from public ridicule and death – and to free her to have a family right with God. In his mind the decision was settled.

After Joseph knew, and had planned what he would do, the angel of the Lord came to him. By itself, hearing from an angel is a thing of wonder. Scripture tells us that to behold an angel is to see a being terrifyingly amazing. Yet the angel of the Lord did not appear face to face, but spoke to Joseph in a dream. To hear the news in a dream was probably even more surreal.

In that conversation, the angel shifted Joseph’s understanding of what was true. “[T]he child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (1:20) There *was* no other man? Mary’s pregnancy was something new and special. It was an example of God working in surprising ways. The angel gave Joseph guidance about what he could do to participate in this wonderful thing. He was to marry her and name this son... this son of God... Jesus. Matthew’s language is very straightforward, but just imagine how stunned Joseph must have been. His mind was made up, yet God invited him to respond differently.



As we look into the future, we all have plans that we cherish. For some, it may be a plan *not* to plan. For others, we are as Joseph – thinking and praying through possibilities. We are trying to live rightly and justly. We have expectations for how life will be, and for how we will act in that possible future. We imagine our personal hopes being fulfilled and all being right in our lives.

But God’s work in our world often does not fit into *our* plans. I have found that frequently in my adult life – has that happened for you, too? I think about my

hopes and plans. So often, the Holy Spirit ends up helping me let go of the things that I am most set on. Here's one superficial example for you: I had always thought that the one part of the country where I was unwilling to live was the south. Among other things, the summer heat was too stifling and the bugs too enormous. However, when the time was right, I chose to live in both North and South Carolina in order to attend seminary. Somehow what had seemed most important before weren't as important when God was making something new. My desire to participate in God's work helped me to hear and see differently.



In the last year, God has been preparing Emanuel's for something new. This congregational family has been walking the gospel talk in this place for a long time now. It's not that God is calling us to a different gospel, or to different vocation as Christians. Instead, the church's position in our society and the world have changed. Many of our financial situations have changed. Some of our congregation's gifts and weaknesses have changed. Like Joseph, we may have made up our mind for what it means to be faithful in this place. Yet that plan has led us to stress and broken stewardship. God calls us into a new way of being the church, without those holding us back. God call us to be immersed once again in the wonder of the Spirit's work in the world.

Our church's challenge is not just about money, it's about how we can more clearly witness to the world around us. God did a wonderful new thing for the world in the birth of Jesus Christ, and in all that followed in his life. Our challenge is to share that good news. As Christians, we are charged to invite others to be blessed by God in learning and fellowship and service, in the name of Christ. When we start

to live into this vocation more fully, we will be blessed with a renewed energy, and sense of purpose, and vision for the future of our ministry.

God is doing something new in this congregation, and in this wider community. Pray with me, that together we may understand how to participate in God's new creation.

Dear God, you gave a special gift to Joseph and Mary, who prepared to welcome your son to the world. Open our eyes to behold your creative, gracious work in and around us. Open our hearts, that we may be filled with wonder, and faith, and courage to follow you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.