

“Advent as Warfare: Fools for Christ in Spiritual Battle”

Matthew 1:18-25

December 20, 2020 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

Our text this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter one, verses eighteen through twenty-five.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

[...]

INTRODUCTION

We’ve spoken, in this season of Advent, about three entities on the battlefield of this world: God, the devil, and, in the middle, humanity.

We’ve spoken about how the battle we live in the midst of is a battle not only between two kingdoms, but between two ages: between the present evil age of rebellion, and the age of the reign of God, which is both already here and also yet to come.

And then, last week, we spoke about the wartime virtue of patience that is needed to live faithfully in this in-between time that we find ourselves in.

This morning, as Christmas approaches, we consider what it looks like for us to patiently follow the ways of the Kingdom of Heaven – the ways of the reign of God – while still living in this world that is in rebellion against God.

And the foundational way we will do that this morning is by considering Joseph in Matthew chapter one.

Joseph gives us a picture, in these verses, of what it means to live according to the ways of the Kingdom of Heaven, while still dwelling in the kingdom of this world.

HEAVENLY HONOR & WORLDLY DISHONOR

And though it can be easy to miss in a surface-level reading, one of the things we will see as we look closer at Joseph's role in the Christmas story, is that he presents us with the stark contrast between heavenly ways and worldly ways.

More specifically, what we will see here is that Christmas calls us to follow the example of Joseph: to despair of worldly honor, worldly wisdom, and worldly salvation, in order to receive heavenly honor, heavenly wisdom, and heavenly salvation.

Let me say that again. Joseph's example shows us that Christmas calls us to despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation, so that we can instead receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation.

As we look at that dynamic, we will see it in Joseph. But then, as we zoom out a bit further, we will see that the same calling is being placed on all the Jews of the first-century. And as we zoom out even further than that, we will see that the same call is then extended to all of humanity. And finally, as we come back to the ground level, we will ask what that looks like in our own day-to-day lives.

So we will see this dynamic for Joseph, for Israel, for humanity, and then for us.

JOSEPH

And as we consider the pattern of what Joseph is being called to in our text, the first thing we need to recognize is the profound heavenly honor, wisdom, and role in salvation that Joseph is being offered here as the angel speaks to him.

First, consider the honor. An angel of God appears to Joseph. Most people don't get that – not now, and not in the days of the Bible either. It was a rare thing, and Joseph receives it. That itself is a profound honor.

But it turns out that that is only a prelude to what is to come. God himself is coming to save and to dwell with his people. God is coming, as a child, to be among his people. And he is asking Joseph to raise him. He is asking Joseph to be his earthly protection. He is asking Joseph to care

for him, and provide for him, and nurture him. He is asking Joseph to be the adoptive father of God incarnate.

That's functionally what the angel is asking Joseph to do. First, he was to marry the mother of this child. But also, the angel stresses, he was to name the child. In the ancient world, naming a child was the responsibility of the child's legal father, and thus ensures the official status of the child as the son and heir of the one who names him. [France, 48] God is asking Joseph to serve as his adoptive father on earth.

What could be a higher honor? What could be a greater distinction?

But God here presents to Joseph not only honor, but also wisdom. He tells Joseph what he – what God – intends to do, in a way that neither Joseph nor anyone around him could have ever discerned with their own wisdom. He tells Joseph that the promises of old are being fulfilled. He tells Joseph that the Holy Spirit has done a miraculous work right under everyone's nose. He tells Joseph that the Messiah is arriving.

What could be greater wisdom?

And then, with that, God offers for Joseph to participate and join in God's astounding work of salvation. He tells Joseph that the Messiah is coming to deliver God's people – and not just from their temporal troubles, but from their deepest needs: he is coming to save his people from their sins. God is doing his great saving work – the work he first promised to Adam and Eve after their rebellion in the Garden, and he is asking Joseph to be a part of that.

What work could be greater? What kind of salvation could be more glorious?

God here calls on Joseph to receive heavenly honor, heavenly wisdom, and heavenly salvation.

That much is clear.

But what we also need to see is that, inextricably tied up in that, God also calls on Joseph to despair of worldly honor, worldly wisdom, and worldly salvation. Because every heavenly gift that is offered here is set against its worldly equivalent.

Look at the situation Joseph finds himself in. Joseph and Mary are betrothed. This is a relationship with a much deeper commitment level than modern engagement, but it is not yet full marriage. Mary is still living in her father's household, and Mary and Joseph have not come together sexually. And then, Mary is found to be pregnant. We're not told how far along she was at this point. But it was far enough for Joseph to find out. Luke tells us that Mary went to see Elizabeth shortly after Jesus was conceived, and stayed with her for three months. In any case, Joseph is now aware. And he understandably assumes that she has been unfaithful.

Joseph is a compassionate man, and he does not want to create any more of a scandal for Mary than is necessary, but he also, understandably, wants to end the betrothal – which required a form of divorce even though their marriage had not yet been completed or consummated.

And that's when the angel comes and tells Joseph to marry her anyway.

Now, we have discussed the heavenly honor that this brought to Joseph. But stop for a minute and consider the worldly dishonor that it also brought to him. Some people may have already known about the pregnancy, if Joseph has found out. And even if they haven't found out yet, if Mary is likely several months into the pregnancy, then at whatever time the baby does come, people will be able to do the math. They'll know the baby was conceived before the wedding. And then, by giving Joseph the heavenly honor of naming Jesus, the angel also calls on Joseph to publicly identify the child as his own ... which the world would likely see as an admission that he was the biological father.

Of course Joseph could tell people about the angel and the virgin conception of the child ... but I wonder how many would believe him. People in the ancient world knew where babies normally came from.

In the eyes of the unbelieving world, Joseph's actions look like an admission of fornication.

And for a just man, as we are told Joseph was, living in a culture that highly valued sexual chastity, such an admission would have brought worldly dishonor onto Joseph. But that was what Joseph was called to in order to receive the heavenly honor offered to him.

Of course it's possible that some people would believe that Joseph wasn't the biological father. That Mary spent several months out of town early in the pregnancy may have encouraged that perspective. That might clear Joseph of the charge of unchastity ... but in the eyes of his culture it would open him up instead to the charge of being a fool.

Joseph the fool, who married a woman who wasn't even faithful to him during their engagement. Joseph, the fool, who named and so played along with the farce that the child was his when it wasn't. Or Joseph, the fool, who bought a story about an angel and a virginal conception from his unfaithful betrothed.

Some commentators point out that the words of some of Jesus's critics in John 8 may allude to the rumor, even in Jesus's adulthood, that his conception was the result of immorality [Carson, 352; Morris, 462]. And so it's not at all difficult to believe that such rumors would abound around Joseph in Jesus's infancy.

But in order to receive the wisdom from heaven, Joseph had to accept that he would be viewed as a fool by the unbelieving world.

Finally, by uniting himself to what would appear to many to be the result of an act of immorality – whether committed himself, or by his wife with another – Joseph would look to many like he was setting himself against the salvation of his people.

Many Jews believed that their subjugation to the Romans was a penalty for the sins of their fellow Jews, and they believed that their calling was to correct or to expel those Jews who were living immoral lives. But by either acting in immorality himself, or by embracing a woman who was guilty of immorality, many Jews would see Joseph as part of the problem among the people – as a hindrance against the salvation of Israel. Joseph would be seen as one more reason why God had not rescued his people from their oppressors.

In order to participate in God's great salvation, Joseph would have to be seen, in the eyes of the world, to be part of the problem – to be a source of condemnation.

To receive heavenly honor, Joseph had to embrace worldly dishonor. To receive heavenly wisdom, Joseph had to embrace looking like a fool to the world. To participate in heavenly salvation, Joseph had to be willing to appear to the unbelieving world as if he were instead contributing to their condemnation.

To receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation, Joseph had to reject their worldly equivalents.

And he did. Without fanfare we are told of Joseph's simple but monumental decision. We read: "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."

Joseph accepted the heavenly gift, and embraced the worldly consequences.

We are not told in detail how this played out for Joseph in his relationships to those around him. But we might imagine it.

The coming of Christ called on Joseph to despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation, so that he could receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation.

But that call did not end with Joseph.

ISRAEL

In Matthew, chapter one, Matthew also makes it clear that the same calling was extended to all the Jews of the first century.

Matthew does this first by citing Isaiah 7:14. Now, Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 is really interesting, and I could easily spend a sermon on just that ... but it takes us a bit off of our focus this morning, so instead of digging into it I will simply point out that the source of this prophecy in Isaiah chapter seven points to another time in the history of God's people, centuries earlier, when worldly wisdom and salvation were set against heavenly wisdom and salvation.

And then, having alluded to that theme, Matthew focuses on what the prophecy means for Jesus and for the Jews around him in the first century. [See Leithart, 62-63; France, 55-57; Ortlund, 1254; Blomberg, 4-5]

Isaiah 7:14 promises a child who will be "Immanuel", which means "God with us." It promises the incarnation of God the Son, through a miraculous conception in the womb of a virgin.

But why will God come among us? Why will he be incarnate?

The name the angel gives to the child tells us. “Jesus” means “the Lord [Yahweh] saves.” – or “the Lord [Yahweh] is salvation.” [France, 53] This child will come to save. He will come to deliver. He will come to bring salvation.

But what kind of salvation? What kind of deliverance? Deliverance from what?

Well ... what kind of deliverance were most first-century Jews looking for? What did they think they most needed to be saved from?

Commentator R.T. France answers that question. He writes: “There seems little doubt that the dominant concern in first-century Jewish hope was with their political subjection, with the restoration of the kingdom of David as the messianic goal.” [France, 54]

In other words, it was from the physical oppression of the Romans that most Jews believed they most needed deliverance. *That* was the kind of salvation they were looking for. [Blomberg, 3]

And is that what Jesus offers them?

Well, what does the angel say?

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from the Romans.”

No ... that’s not right.

“You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people *from their sins*.”

The coming of Jesus was, among other things, a proclamation to the first-century Jews that what they thought was the biggest threat in their lives was *not* the biggest threat in their lives. It wasn’t something “out there” that was their biggest problem. It wasn’t Caesar. It wasn’t the Romans. It wasn’t the pagan world. It was their own sin.

That is what they most needed to be saved from.

The first Christmas – the coming of Jesus Christ – was a call to the first-century Jews to despair of worldly salvation in order to receive heavenly salvation.

It was a call to reject the idea that they most needed to be saved from the Romans, in order, instead, to receive true salvation from their sins. It was a call to reject the idea that they were already good and honorable enough, in order to receive, instead, forgiveness, grace, and true heavenly honor.

The first Christmas not only called Joseph, but it called the first-century Jews to despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation, in order to receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation.

HUMANITY

But it didn't stop there either. Because the coming of Christ, on that first Christmas, truly, at its heart, called on all humanity to follow that same pattern – to despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation in order to receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation.

And that reality is actually at the heart of the virgin birth itself.

After all, what is the significance of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus?

Now, there are many aspects of significance to it, of course. But often people focus on how it relates to Jesus's sinlessness, even though Matthew never really connects those two things here. Instead, Matthew chooses words and images that evoke the work of God in creation, in Genesis one and two. [Leithart, 61]

The word "genesis" is actually used in the Greek of verse eighteen. The description of the Holy Spirit creating new life in the womb of the virgin Mary seems to allude to the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis one, before creating the world. As the Spirit did the work of creation back in Genesis 1, so the same Spirit is doing a work of new creation in Matthew 1. But what is the significance of that?

Peter Leithart describes its significance like this – he writes: "This virgin birth is thus a sign of God's new initiative, of God's new creation, which begins with the creation of the new Man, Jesus. Our salvation does not come – it *cannot* come – from inside humanity. We are not capable of saving ourselves. God has to come in from the outside if we are going to be saved. We cannot repair the damage of sin or construct a new creation by our own initiative, by our own reproduction, by our own expertise or power. The virgin birth passes a judgment on *all* human efforts at self-salvation, all our prideful pretense that we can put the world right through political or technological or educational means. If the world is going to be put right, God must enter the world from the outside, because everything that comes from within humanity is corrupted and weak." [Leithart, 61]

Humanity is bent on the conviction that we can save ourselves.

It was true in the past. And it is true in the present. It is true of men and women all around the world today – of religious people, of secular people, of people of all walks of life.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all the history of failed (and often disastrous) attempts, human beings remain convinced that if we could just straighten out a few things, then we really could save ourselves from what's wrong with the world.

If we could just get this or that in place, then things would be right. If we could just put in place this educational program. If we could just institute that economic reform. If we could just win this election. If we could just gain influence in that culture-forming institution. If we could just get people to adopt this outlook. If we could just teach people to cultivate that habit. If we could just raise awareness about this issue. If we could just help people understand that historical truth. If we could open people's eyes to this reality, or shield people's eyes from that bad influence.

If we could just do *this* or *that*, *then* we would be okay. Then the world would be okay. Then we would usher in a new age. Then we would be good, and right. Then we would be saved.

Now ... many of the things we may have in mind along those lines can have real value in life. But none of them can save us. None of them can save society. None of them can save humanity.

Each one, when sought as the solution of our problems, becomes a form of worldly wisdom, and a means to worldly salvation.

But the coming of Christ declares that heavenly wisdom rejects all such efforts at self-salvation. And so heavenly wisdom looks to the world like foolishness.

The coming of Christ declares that heavenly honor is found not in what we achieve ourselves, but in what we receive from Christ. Heavenly honor is worldly dishonor.

The coming of Christ tells us that our deliverance from sin, and reconciliation to God, trumps all worldly conflicts. And yet, to the eyes of the world, this downgrading of worldly conflicts looks like indifference. Heavenly salvation looks to the world like betrayal.

Heavenly wisdom is worldly folly. Heavenly honor is worldly dishonor. And heavenly salvation often looks like worldly condemnation.

US

And that is true not just on the big abstract level of humanity, but it is also true in each one of our lives.

Christmas calls on us to follow the example of Joseph and to despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation in order to receive heavenly honor, wisdom, and salvation.

To begin, consider wisdom. Consider wisdom, and Christmas itself. We are entering the season of Christmas, and it is being acknowledged everywhere, all around us.

As a society, we are entering the season of Christmas ... and unless you have really cloistered yourself in the church, each one of us knows people – most of us *many* people – whom we know, and care about, and whose opinions matter to us, who believe that you'd have to be an idiot to believe the things that Christmas is actually focused on: who believe that you'd have to be an idiot to believe in the miraculous virgin conception of a child; who believe that you'd have to be a moron to believe that the Creator of the universe decided to come to earth by becoming a baby boy in Palestine in a modest town in the first century. Some of them might respect you more if you believed in the vague Christmas magic of holiday TV specials than if you believed the story we've read this morning from Matthew.

But the story we've read in Matthew is heavenly wisdom. The challenge to you is to embrace it, even though it is foolishness in the eyes of the world.

And of course that doesn't end with Christmas. The cross of Christ, the kingship of Jesus, the promise of Christ's second coming, the Bible as a whole – all of these things are foolishness to the world. You cannot have heavenly wisdom without being a fool in the eyes of the world.

We know this because the Apostle Paul tells us. He writes in First Corinthians chapter one:

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Are you willing to be a fool in the eyes of this world for Christ?

Think of those people whose opinions you value. How scared are you that they might learn what you really believe? How scared are you that you might become a fool in their eyes? How desperate are you to appear wise before them?

Christmas is a calling to despair of the wisdom of this world and to embrace the wisdom of heaven, though others regard it as foolishness.

And it doesn't stop with wisdom and foolishness. It extends, as well, into honor.

There is no non-Christian worldview, liberal or conservative, that overlaps so well with Christianity that being a Christian will not make you, in some way, dishonorable in their eyes.

In a world where so many see personal freedom and liberty as the highest good ... for you to believe that your calling as a Christian is to live your life as a slave to Christ [Romans 6], would seem to many not just foolish, but ethically wrong.

In a world that tells you that the right way to live is to look inside yourself, and find out what you really want and who you really are, and then live that out authentically ... to tell others in that context that we have chosen to follow Jesus, and that Jesus says “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross” – an instrument of death – “daily” [Luke 9:23] – to the world around us, such a framework sounds not just odd, but immoral.

In a world where so many delight in hating their enemies, a refusal to do so – an insistence that as a Christian we are called to love our enemies [Matthew 5:43-48] – will soon earn you the anger of your friends.

In a world where everyone wants to insist that they are good and point at others as the source of the evils of the world, insisting that we – that each one of us – are part of the problem [Romans 3:23], will strike many as an act of cowardice and treason against the cause.

The gospel – the Christian faith, the core message of Christmas itself – is not just odd to the unbelieving world ... it's not even just foolish ... but it is dishonorable. It is immoral.

But the coming of Christ calls us to despair of worldly honor, that we might receive heavenly honor.

Finally, there is the opposition between worldly salvation and heavenly salvation. And here we need to be real, that we, ourselves, in our hearts, often long for worldly salvation far more than we long for heavenly salvation.

We all, you and I, each and every one of us, desperately want to believe that our biggest problem is someone else or something else out there, and not our own sin – not our own selfishness, not our own greed, and lust, and anger, and self-righteousness. We want to believe that we are good, that anything wrong with us is relatively small, a personally foible that is really just kind of quirky and endearing. We do not want to believe that our sin and our selfishness is as ugly as it truly is.

But the gospel – the story of Christmas – tells us that our sin, our selfishness, is so dangerous, so ugly, so ingrained in our hearts, that the only solution was for God himself to come to earth as a baby, to live the kind of life we should have lived, and then to die the kind of death that we deserved, on our behalf. *That* was the only thing that could save us from ourselves. And if we're honest, we don't like that. We don't want it to be true. But it is. That is the salvation we most need.

And the amazing message of Christmas is that God has provided it. He has come. He has given himself in the incarnation, he has given himself on the cross, to save us from our sin.

And as amazing as that gift is – as mind-boggling as it is – for most of us, accepting it, day after day, feels like death. As much as it comforts, it also cuts.

And most days, we'd prefer worldly salvation to heavenly salvation. I mean, if we thought about it intentionally, maybe we'd never say that. But I would bet that you spend more time thinking about your worldly problems than you do thinking about your own sin. I would bet that you spend more anger on your worldly problems than on your own sin. I would bet that you spend more energy battling your worldly problems than battling your own sin. Which would all seem to indicate that you want worldly salvation more than you really care about your heavenly salvation.

Accepting heavenly salvation means accepting that other people, who have said that you are part of the problem, while they might be wrong in some of the details, are still right in the end.

Accepting heavenly salvation means accepting that we are not who we want to think we are ... but we are desperately in need, and ultimately helpless in the most important things of life.

We are helpless. But God is not. And Christmas proclaims that God is at work to save.

Jesus Christ has come. God with us.

God with us. What worldly honor could be greater than that?

He came and he taught. God instructing us. What worldly wisdom could be better than that?

He came and he died to save us from our sins. God saving us. What worldly salvation could be better than that?

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and shall call his name Immanuel, [Isaiah 7:14]
which means God with us.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. [Isaiah 9:6-7]

And so, brothers and sisters. Let us despair of worldly honor, wisdom, and salvation, let us greet Christ our Lord, and let us receive from him heavenly honor, heavenly wisdom, and heavenly salvation, far beyond anything that this world has to offer us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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