

God Is Doing a New Thing
Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2016

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Grace, mercy, and peace from our God, who makes all things new.

How many of you like it when things change? I don't mean little shifts or slight variations. I mean when things really change – when things get turned upside down. I mean when the old is thrown out and the new is ushered in.

I see some uncertain looks. And I expect to see some nervousness when I speak about change to a group of good Lutherans. After all, the Lutheran opinion on change is summed up in the old joke – how many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb – and the answer is – CHANGE?!!!

We chuckle at a joke like that, but down deep many people don't like change. Most people are content with things staying like they always have been. We have sayings like, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," and "Don't rock the boat."

But, you know what? We worship a God who, in many ways, is a God of change. God has been changing things from the very dawn of Creation. From the first time God said, "Let there be ..." change was in the works. I can almost hear the angel Gabriel saying to the angel Michael, "Look, God is doing a new thing."

In today's Gospel reading, Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, learned all about God doing a new thing. We don't always appreciate just what Joseph had to go through to play his part in our salvation story. But if we look at the changes that Joseph had to see and embrace to be Christ's earthly father, we might better see and embrace the changes we have to make to be Christ's earthly followers.

To understand Joseph, we must understand the marriage customs of Jewish culture of Christ's time. The marriage between Joseph and Mary had been arranged by their families. After the arrangement was agreed upon, the couple was considered married

but didn't live together for one year. They remained apart for a year to prove that the bride was pure. As long as the bride didn't turn up pregnant during that year, the marriage took place and everyone was happy.

We know the problem this custom held for Joseph. Mary turned up pregnant. That put Joseph in a real pickle. He knew the baby wasn't his. But if he exposed Mary publicly, she would be stoned to death. That's when he decided to quietly annul the marriage and hope the bad things would just go away. Joseph's love for Mary was greater than the pain he had to feel for her apparent unfaithfulness.

Now intervenes the angel with a message from God. The angel tells Joseph not to worry. The angel says, "This is cool, Joseph. God is just doing a new thing." And how does Joseph respond? Joseph responds by going along with the plan. No big deal you think? Let's look at what Joseph had to do to accept God's new thing.

The reading says that, after Joseph woke up, he immediately took Mary into his house to be his wife. That was a big deal. Joseph didn't wait for the customary year. He risked the shame of breaking tradition, of alienating his family and friends, in order to save Mary the shame of being found pregnant and not married.

Joseph was willing to do whatever it took to bring himself in line with God's plan. God was doing a completely new thing. God was doing something that was totally outside the box. And Joseph was willing to go along with whatever God wanted.

The birth of Christ isn't the first time God did some radically new thing. And Joseph isn't the first person God ever invited to step outside the box – to join God in doing a new thing. Let's look at a few of those people.

When God came to Abraham with his new plan, Abraham had things pretty nice. He was a son of the richest family in the area. Abraham had cattle and property and servants. But then God told Abraham he wanted him to leave everything behind. God said, "Come with me. I'm about to do a new thing." And, of course, we know that Abraham followed. No where are we told that Abraham told God, "I'm too scared." or "I'm not qualified." or "I've never done it like that before." Abraham just followed.

Moses was probably fairly content with tending his father-in-law's sheep out in the desert of Midian. Sure, there were probably times when Moses thought about being back in the luxuries of Egypt, but he never went back. That is, he didn't go back until God decided it was time for Moses to do a new thing. Now, Moses did say he was scared and he did claim to not be qualified – but Moses went anyway.

Let's fast forward to the early 1500's. In Germany there's a young monk named Luther. He's bright, he's energetic, and he's doing pretty good for himself. He's worked hard and got his PhD. He's a professor in the local college. Life's pretty good for Martin Luther.

Then comes the day in 1517 when God taps Martin on the shoulder and says, "I need you to go in a completely different direction. I need you to help put the church back on track." From that day on, Luther became a complete servant of God. This meant turning his back on his former life – losing many close friends – hiding out like an outlaw – being very uncomfortable sometimes.

Now what does Joseph and Abraham and Moses and Luther have to do with Christmas and what do their stories have to do with you and me? It's all about God doing a new thing. It's all about change. It's all about moving forward not sitting still. It's all about reaching out, taking God's hand, and joining him in doing a new thing.

Christmas is all about God doing a new thing. Virgins don't have babies. God doesn't take on human flesh and live like one of us. God doesn't stoop down to touch a leper or reach out to comfort a prostitute. God doesn't willingly subject himself to ridicule and punishment. God doesn't hang on a cross and die.

You want to bet? My God does. My God is all about doing an unheard of new thing. My God is one who's capable of thinking and acting outside the box of our human close-mindedness. My God does a radical new thing and he wants us to do it, too. My God loves. And the object of my God's love is us.

It's God's love that has held back his righteous wrath and allowed the world to exist from Adam and Eve's first sin to this very day. It's God's love that devised the plan for our salvation and made that first Christmas necessary. It's God's love that gave you the life you have and everything in it. It's God's love that moved the Holy Spirit to place faith in your heart and guarantee your eternity with him.

Christmas is all about God doing a new thing. Christmas is all about unconditional love. That's not new for God because God is love – pure love. But unconditional love is always new for human beings. To love unconditionally, people must think and act outside their natural parameters. Unconditional love just isn't normal for unmodified, sinful people.

But you are not an unmodified, sinful person. You are one of God's new things. You have been changed by the presence of Christ in your heart. You have been filled up to overflowing with God's unconditional love. God has reached down into the depravity of sin, pulled you out, cleaned you up with his love, dressed you up in Christ's righteousness, and set you apart for all the world to see.

This Christmas season, and all through the coming year, let's do something about who we are. We are God's new things. We need to let that show. We need to be bold in telling others about the love that brought Jesus to the manger. We need to be bold when we see an opportunity to help someone else, especially an unbeliever. We need to be bold in moving God's kingdom forward even when we feel uncomfortable and out of place.

We need to be like Joseph, Abraham, Moses, and Luther. We need to pray, "Okay, God, I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm scared to death. But I want to help move your kingdom forward. So, Lord, take my hand and help me do a new thing for you."