



Divine Direction

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 1:18-25

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means “coming.” It is a season of the church year that is meant to be for preparing and getting ready for the coming of Jesus. And I have to tell you, I have been ready for Advent for weeks—since well before election day.

As Americans, we have all been through an interesting time given the conclusion of a brutal election cycle. Whether your candidate won or lost, all of us have been bruised by the tenor of the campaign this past year. I’ve been saddened to witness the anger, the frustration and downright meanness that was displayed on both sides, and I’m glad the tone has changed, and now we are looking to what changes will come with a new president.

I love Advent because it reminds us that Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. He is the ultimate ruler—the King of kings and Lord of lords. While we do not know the future, we know the one who does. This Advent, we as a church are going to explore the difference that Jesus makes in our everyday lives.

Today’s passage is from the Gospel of Matthew which begins with a long genealogy of Jesus, reminding us of the long, complicated history of the nation of Israel and the many ups and downs, twists and turns they experienced. And as we reflect on this amazing work of God in history, the story takes another turn. It is as if the curtain opens on a grand drama that is at play, and then the spotlight focuses on one man named Joseph experiencing a great difficulty and dilemma.

Joseph’s dilemma: We the readers learn that Mary and Joseph are engaged—the first stage of betrothal when a spouse was chosen, usually by the family. Though there was no physical intimacy during this “engagement,” it was considered legally binding.



We, the reader, know Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but Joseph does not. So he assumes, as most would, that Mary has

been unfaithful. This was considered adultery—a breaking of a covenant bond—to the same degree as if they were actually married. In the Old Testament, this was punishable by death, but by the time of the New Testament, it was usually dealt with through divorce. But even divorce was severe and humiliating.

It's interesting to me that the passage does not say how Joseph *feels* about his dilemma. He must have felt disappointment by such a betrayal because of his situation. It would be understandable if he felt anger—righteous anger. Perhaps this struck me because of the angry tone of the campaign. The truth is that anger is an emotion that we all have, but the question is what do we do with it? Most of us are very adept at justifying our anger as being caused by someone else or circumstances we can't control.

"It's hard to be angry and not hurt anyone with it."

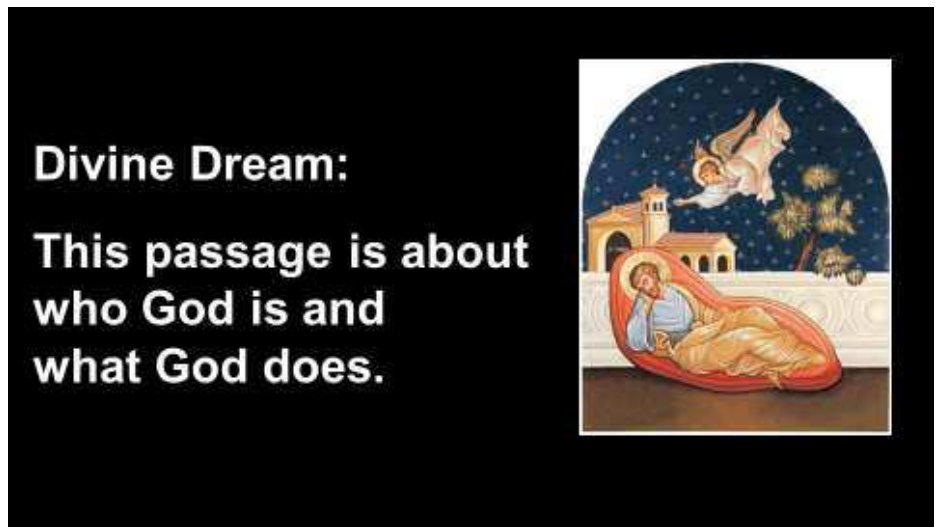
Dallas Willard

Years ago, I heard Dallas Willard say, "It's hard to be angry and not hurt anyone with it." That has stuck with me for decades. Joseph may well have felt angry. We don't know. What we do know is that he is a person of good

character and integrity. He is described as "righteous" meaning he lives by the law—God's revealed will. And we know his decision.

Joseph's decision: Joseph decides to do the right thing. Consistent with his sense of righteousness, Joseph had already decided not to go by the letter of the law but chose, out of consideration, to dismiss Mary quietly. He chooses mercy over justice. He focuses less on being right and chooses instead to be loving. Love is not a feeling. Love is an act of the will. Love is to will the good of another. Joseph chooses to respond to Mary in love—not vengeance.

Divine Dream: But this passage is not really about Joseph. This passage is about who God is and what God does. God wants Joseph to understand His will, so God acts by coming to Joseph in a dream speaking to a faithful man in a difficult situation through a divine messenger. What does God say through the angel?



“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” “Do not be afraid” are words often spoken to people in the Bible who encounter the presence of God. Fear is a very human emotion. But in this case, we finally learn what Joseph feels. Joseph has real personal, religious, and relational reasons to feel fear. Remember, he believes Mary had been unfaithful and that the child belongs to another man, so taking her as his wife had huge implications for his life, family, and future.

Divine Drama: But as God speaks to him, Joseph learns the truth of the divine drama that is unfolding: “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Now, we are probably so familiar with this story that its radical nature doesn’t surprise us as it should. Mary is going to have a baby without Joseph or any man being involved. It is an amazing, stunning, unimaginable miracle!



God announces that Mary and Joseph will each play a key role in this divine drama: “She will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin.” God invites Joseph to let go of his wrong belief and personal agenda and idea for his life, family, and future to be a part of something bigger—to be a part of God’s redemptive plan. In naming the child, Joseph is accepting him as

his own, adopting him into the Davidic line as an authentic “son of David.”

This child is to be named Jesus, which is from the Hebrew name יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua) or Joshua in English, which means “deliverer.” Jesus will save his people from their sins.

Not only that, Matthew quotes from Isaiah saying, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him ‘Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” The word Emmanuel appears only three times in the Bible. Matthew takes this prophetic text to point to the truth that this child is the promised Messiah.

Emmanuel expresses the wonder of the incarnation, that God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In the Old Testament, God's presence with His people Israel was particularly evident in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:8), but the glory that filled the tabernacle was to be surpassed by the personal presence of God the Son during his life and ministry on earth.

Divine Direction: Joseph understood this dream was a means of divine direction for his life. “When Joseph awoke from sleep, *he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him*; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

This is a complete change of direction for Joseph as he lets go of his best human agenda and decision in order to follow God's will. Joseph could not know what it would mean for him to be the earthly father of Jesus, but he believed the truth that was revealed to him and acted on it, trusting that the God who came to him in a dream would be with him raising the child.

Joseph's and Mary's circumstances are unique. This is a one-time action of God in history, but the encouragement to us is that God is with us, too, in all the ups and downs of our lives, and He longs to give us divine direction.

Emmanuel refers to God's everlasting intent for human life—namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God.

I love this title “Emmanuel” given to Jesus, because it helps us understand God’s purpose for us. Emmanuel refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life—namely, that we should be, in every

aspect, a dwelling place of God. What a comfort. God is not distant or detached from His people. He is not unconcerned or unaware of our troubles. He loves us. He sent his Son to rescue us from sin and death. And God is with us.

Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus gave this promise to his followers: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

This is really good news because we are not left to figure things out or take care of things on our own. Like Joseph, we are not reliant on our limited resources or mere human perspective. God is with us to counsel, to comfort, to empower, and to provide divine direction for us whatever circumstances we may find ourselves in.

So what difference does it make in our everyday lives that Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us? In the next few minutes, I want to explore four principles that will help us in answering that question and finding the divine direction we long for.

As Emmanuel, the God with us, Jesus has done everything necessary to free us from our sin so we can live as God created and redeemed us to live. First and foremost, we can enjoy a loving, interactive friendship with God. Most religions reveal their God as a distant entity, and humans are expected to do something to get right with their God or to reach him in their own efforts. But God offers the world something uniquely different in Jesus.

Jesus is Emmanuel—the God who is with us, and He longs for us to experience more and more the love, joy, and peace that comes from living the reality of His

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presence with us every moment of every day. This is not something we make happen. Jesus is God's gift of grace accomplishing for us what we could never accomplish on our own.

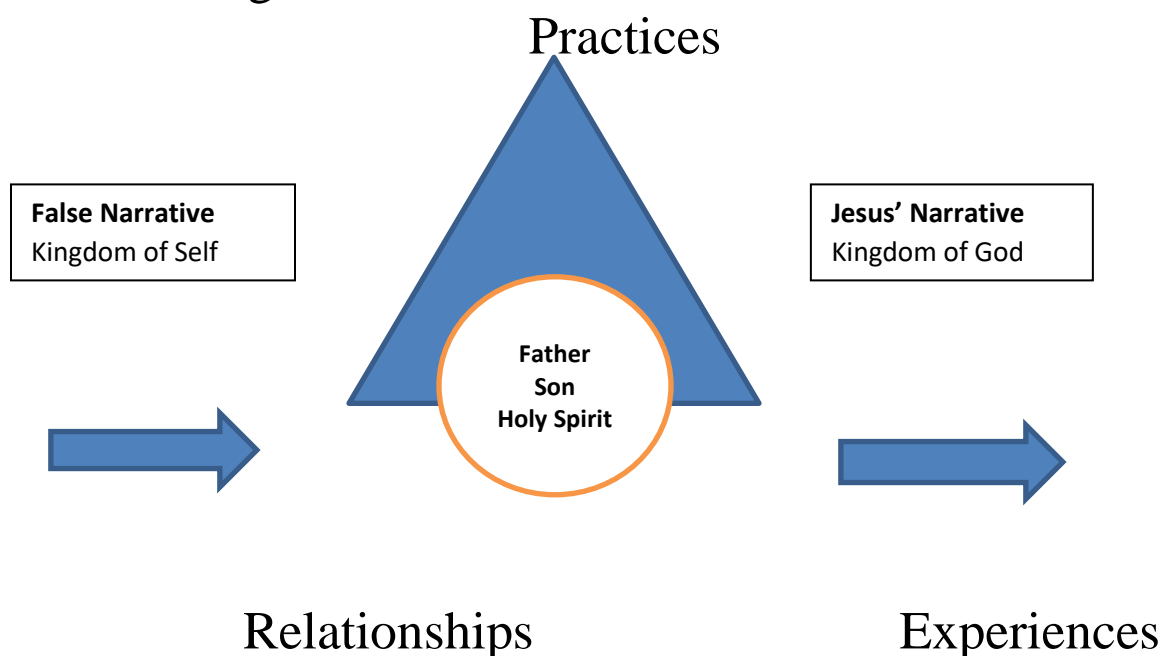
Through his incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus bought this free gift of salvation and forgiveness of sin. Some of you here today may not have a relationship or friendship with God. We receive this free gift through faith. Faith is the hand that reaches out to receive the gift of Jesus and all he has done for us. Even today, you can begin a relationship with God by trusting Jesus and inviting him into your life by faith. He promises to come in.

Some of us may have had a relationship with God for many years, but it may be that instead of love, joy, and peace, our lives are characterized more by disappointment, anger, bitterness, shame, or fear. These emotions are based in what we believe about ourselves. As Basil Pennington observes, “Unhappiness is always a result of not being able to do something I want to do, have something I want to have, or concern about what others will think of me.”

Even after we become a believer, there can be tension inside of us. Though we have a relationship with God and a new nature, our old sinful nature can still pull at us and impact our lives more than we care to admit. Because we are generally committed to not feeling negative emotions, we all have our strategies that help us to feel that we are in control. These coping mechanisms enable us to hold on to our own agenda rather than letting go and letting God do what God will do on His terms. So what do we do?

Second, we learn to live our lives as Jesus would live them if he were we. Another way of saying it is that we are becoming like Christ. We are becoming the kind of people who are responsible—able to respond appropriately and lovingly in every situation. This doesn't just happen by wishing it so. It takes time, intentionality, and training. Rather than suppressing our negative emotions, we acknowledge they are there and allow them to come forward to reveal what we actually believe.

This graphic illustrates that we all have a kingdom of self that is driven by false narratives. Our negative emotions reveal what these false narratives or beliefs are that are running and often ruining our lives. And it is there at that place of honesty and vulnerability that God can change us.



How does this work? As we engage in practices, relationships, and experiences, we let go of the kingdom of self and false narratives of fear, anger, bitterness, and so on. We look to the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us, to make us the people he wants us to be—the kind of people who are able to do God's will, who can live life as it was intended to be. As we do this, we begin to move from a closed, controlling posture of the kingdom of self to an open and receptive posture based on Jesus' narrative in the kingdom of God. This shift leads to the next principle.

Third, we listen for God's voice. A friend forwarded me an e-mail by Rick Warren yesterday that really fits in to what I'm trying to say. He wrote, "The secret to personal change is not willpower.

It's not a pill. It's not a resolution. It's not some vow that you make. The secret to personal change is not something you do or say.

The secret to personal change is something you know. You know the truth. When you change the way you think, it changes the way you feel. And when you change the way you feel, it changes the way you act. Behind every self-defeating act is a lie you believe....

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way you act. Behind every self-defeating act is a lie you believe.

“It may be a lie about yourself, your past or future, God, or others. Why do you do something that you know is bad for you? Because you think there's some kind of payoff. That's the lie! You can only change and fulfill God's purpose for your life if you start with God's truth. If you want to change the way you live, you have to start in your mind.

“You have to know and believe God's truth. When you know the truth, the truth will set you free. What you have to do is expose and uncover the lies that you have been accepting. Some of those lies you picked up on the playground as a kid or from TV. Some of them you picked up from your parents or you creatively thought them up yourself. But they are lies, and when you reject them and instead find out what God has to say, you will experience freedom like you've never known.”

In the last month since the election, there has been a lot of talk about the problem of fake news being posted and forwarded on social media. Earlier this week, I heard an educator say that we really need to train our children (and I would add adults, too) to know how to differentiate facts from fiction. I share this because the same is true with truth.

If the truth sets us free, how do we know the truth? It is critical for believers to have a well-grounded worldview that is based on God's word—the Bible. It is the primary source of truth that the Holy Spirit can and will use to renew and transform our minds. But it's not enough to read the Bible for information. It is possible to hold the Bible as central to life, read it regularly to study doctrine or abstract truths about God without encountering God Himself or hearing His voice and experiencing the transforming reality of His presence and truth.

We need to learn to read the Bible in such a way that we see how God spoke to and interacted with people throughout history and to believe that He can do the same for us!

Joseph was a man who was in a dilemma, and through a divine dream, God spoke truth to Joseph in such a way that he was transformed. God gave divine direction. Joseph knew God's will and he did God's will. Do we read that story and believe God could do that for us? He can. He wants to, but we have to become the kind of people who are listening, waiting, and wanting God to speak to us and are then willing to follow His will, whatever it may be.

I believe God speaks through the Bible, through small group discussion, interactions with friends, even through books and movies. I believe this because I have experienced God speaking in these ways. But these days, one of the main ways I hear God's voice is through Renewing Prayer, which is a spiritual discipline that God uses to help us pay attention to our negative emotions and then identify the lies we believe. We then invite the Holy Spirit to replace those lies with truth in such a way that it brings incredible transformation. This discipline is changing my life and the lives of others, and I highly recommend it to you.

So we all want divine direction, and we want to know God's will. Here it is straight from the Bible: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thessalonians 16-18). In my early days of discipleship, I thought this was crazy—and

impossible! How can you stop your life and pray all the time? But then I realized I was looking at it all wrong. If Jesus is Emmanuel, and he is ever present, and always with me, then prayer is not merely something I do. It's a way of being and living in the presence of God.

Because Jesus is Emmanuel and God with us—Four, we can live in an ongoing conversation with God right here and right now.

We are to experience the reality of God's presence with us and recognize His voice in the midst of our everyday lives. I can say for certain that God wants to speak to each one of us. We need to have a loving friendship with God, learn to live our lives as Jesus would live it if he were we, listen to the voice of God and the truth He wants us to believe—especially through the Bible. But we can have an ongoing conversation with God right here and right now.

So this Advent, here are some questions to consider:

God is always loving us, but are we loving him?

God is working for our good, but are we looking to Jesus and leaning on the Holy Spirit?

God is always speaking His truth, but are we listening?

God is always acting, but are we paying attention?

Advent is a busy time with much to do to get ready to celebrate Christmas. But let us not neglect the reality that God is with us. Let us not get so caught up in the tasks to be done that we forget the one whom we celebrate. Let's take time to begin or cultivate our relationship with Him and to listen to His voice as we read His word, worship together as a community, reach out in love to others. May this truly be a season in which we continue to grow in our knowledge, understanding, and experience of the difference Jesus makes in our lives.

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