

DOG RACES

Sermon, December 22, 2019

Texts: Matthew 1:17-25, Romans 1:1-7

Along Highway 17 near Santa Cruz, California, there is a sign advertising the presence of Bethany University (formerly Bethany Bible College), an Assemblies of God institution of higher learning. Like many church signs around the country, the sign for Bethany University always conveys short spiritual messages of encouragement to passing motorists. You may have seen some of these church signs, with messages like:

"A LOT OF KNEELING WILL KEEP YOU IN GOOD STANDING"

"HE WHO KNEELS BEFORE GOD CAN STAND BEFORE ANYONE"

"CHRISTMAS—EASIER TO SPELL THAN HANUKKAH"

"ASAP ... ALWAYS SAY A PRAYER"

"GIVE GOD WHAT'S RIGHT -- NOT WHAT'S LEFT"

"GIVE THE DEVIL AN INCH, AND HE'LL BECOME YOUR RULER."

"DON'T WAIT FOR SIX STRONG MEN TO TAKE YOU TO CHURCH."

"ROMANS 6:23 -- THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH ... SO QUIT BEFORE PAYDAY."

"WORRY IS THE DARKROOM IN WHICH NEGATIVES CAN DEVELOP."

"WITHOUT CHRIST, CHRISTMAS IS A HOLLOW DAY."

One day about fourteen years ago, an odd message appeared on the Bethany University sign. It read, "DOG RACES." Dog Races? What in the world did that mean? Well, "Dog Races" was not the original message. The original message was "GOD CARES." But in the darkness of the night, some pranksters rearranged the letters so that it read "DOG RACES."

Now there's a sermon in there somewhere! The divine message comes to us loud and clear throughout our lives, and especially during the Christmas season, and that message is "God Cares." But in the at-times difficult circumstances in our lives, that message can get scrambled and may not come through clearly. Perhaps that message came through with crystal clear clarity at some point in your life, but now there are so many things causing distress, confusion, uncertainty and tension that the message "God Cares" seems more like "Dog Races" (*or RAT Races*).

We do build up a lot of expectations around Christmas. It's supposed to be warm and wonderful, full of family closeness and friendly cheer; it's all trees, lights, presents, peace on Earth, and God bless us everyone. But for many people, Christmas may not be so warm and wonderful. Right in the middle of all the lights and celebrations there's something that's scrambling the message that God cares. There is a mess, something that just isn't right. And for some reason the messes seem always messier at Christmas, this time of the year when you want things to be warm, wonderful, happy, calm. And rather than resting in the message of God's care, it seems as if you are racing just trying to keep up with life.

It may help us enter into the spirit of Christmas this year if we remember the story begins with people who are probably stressed out of their minds. Even that first Christmas, there was a mess. A family mess. I've mentioned this before, but the birth of Jesus had about it the scent of family scandal more than holiday candle. Matthew's Gospel prepares us for the mess in an interesting way. In chapter one we're given this perfect genealogy of Jesus in three neatly wrapped packages of fourteen generations. But for anyone who knows the Old Testament, a closer look reveals it's not so neat. There were skeletons in the Messianic family's closet, strange connections, shameful events, scandals, embarrassing moments. Messes, I should add, that were redeemed and set right by the restoring grace of a God who cares. In this genealogy, Matthew sets the stage for the situation of Joseph and Mary. They are betrothed, and she's expecting a baby. Which is a messy situation, especially in that day and age.

Being betrothed in that era was a bit different from being "engaged" in our day. There were three stages to the betrothal/marriage process. First came the legally binding contract that was publicly signed by the families, as well as outside witnesses. Money and gifts would be exchanged, and an official announcement would be made. The second stage was the official period of betrothal which lasted one year. Because the relationship had already been made legally binding, during this year the man and woman were considered husband and wife, even though they lived under separate roofs. These betrothals could only be terminated by divorce. But what everyone hoped, of course, was that the couple would make it to the third stage when there would be a wedding, and the marriage would be consummated after the groom took the bride to his home. It was during this year long period of betrothal that Mary had to get word to Joseph that she was expecting. I can't imagine how difficult that conversation must have been. Did she tell him herself? Did she try to explain the part about the angel telling her the Holy Spirit conceived the child? Did she cry as she tried to make Joseph understand? We don't know. We do know that when Mary's life was disrupted by God, Joseph's life was disrupted, too. Neither of their lives would ever be the same again.

Some of you here may relate to Mary this season. You have had some unexpected disruption in this past year that has just made a mess of your neatly planned life. Hopefully, there is also a Joseph or two in your life this Christmas. These "Josephs" are the people who may not fully understand what is going on in your life, but they love you, they care for you, and they stick with you and help you in this disruptive mess. In doing so, they model for you the original message of that Bethany billboard, that God cares. They are constant and devoted models of caring faithfulness. You know that you are not making their lives easier. In fact, you know that it costs them to stay and stick with you. Just imagine how many times Mary must have said, *"Joseph, THANK YOU."*

Some of you here may relate more to Joseph this season, and you love your Mary. You love these people whose lives have been disrupted, and you know your life will never be the same as a result of what's happened to them. In the year ahead, some of you ... in fact, maybe all of you ... will experience some sort of disruption. It is our lot in this fallen world; God alone is whole and complete and perfect, lacking nothing. We creatures, by contrast, are always marked by incompleteness, imperfection and brokenness; in fact, it is an essential characteristic of being human. Maybe the disruption will be about you, or maybe it will involve a parent, or a spouse, or a child, or a close friend -- a tragic accident, a lost job, a divorce, a dread disease. When you discover this is happening to someone you love, you first do everything you can to try and prevent it. But, a time will come when you discover that you just can't ... it is beyond your control. Then, like Joseph, you face a great choice. The temptation will be great to just walk away quietly from this person whose life is out of control ... you know, avoid the stress, insulate yourselves from this difficulty, take care of yourself. The other option is that you can do something truly noble, even heroic, and that is to determine you will be faithful and stick by them. Give to help meet their needs, pray for them, love them, maybe even take them into your home; in short, model for them the faithful caring of our caring God. You never know: God just may be conceiving His salvation in this situation; more to the point, it might just be God's salvation for you ... rescuing you from a frankly destructive self-centeredness that we are all prone to, but a lonely self centeredness that will eventually consume you.

But as Joseph found, to find the strength to do the noble and the heroic, it helps immensely to have a vision, a dream ... and visions and dreams are what the angels of God can bring us. Most of us divide life between the sunny side we like and the dark side we try to avoid. We assume any kind of blessing from God will come in the sunshine. But be careful about abandoning the dark disappointments too quickly. If you don't face the darkness, you just may miss a dream. In fact, most dreams come in the dark when we aren't busily rushing about under the sunshine. Those untidy parts in our lives or in our loved ones' lives may just be the angels which will carry us to the Christ child. The angel came to Joseph in a dream, and said, *"Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her really 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 ... He will save you ... from your sins."* And then we are told, *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded; he took Mary home as his wife."*

If you are stressed out this season, well, you're in good company with the Holy Family. Merry Christ-mess! Stress is part of the season; it has been since the very first Christmas! The point of Christmas isn't to have a wonderful, stress-free celebration. The point of Christmas is to receive the Savior, the Prince of Peace, Shalom, Wholeness ... Who more often than not comes to us in the messes and stresses of our lives, in the midst of how it really is, to proclaim the simple yet profound message, **"God Cares."** As the angel said, Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us." He is God with us. God with us, God caring for us, in our messy, chaotic, "dog-racing" lives ... saving, forgiving, and transforming us into people who in turn can go deliver His grace and care and salvation and hope into the lives of all we touch.