

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 18, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“God with Us”

Fourth of Four sermons in a series entitled “Advent Unwrapped”

Christian Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25



A favorite story children like to hear from their parents, aunts and uncles, or grandparents is the story of their birth. They often crave to hear the story again and again, even if they already know it. “Mommy, tell me again how I became your boy” or “Daddy, tell me about when I was born”. Children often ask how they came to be, when they came to be, who was where when they arrived, and how they got their names. A story of origin is soothing and reassuring to children, no matter how many times it is repeated.

Children cherish the story of how they came into a family. This is true for adopted children, perhaps even more so than for biological children. I know this to be true. As Madeline, my daughter, grew-up, her mother and I would often tell her and others the story of how she came to be ours. As time passed, her mind and curiosity developed and allowed her to ask more and more detailed questions. Therefore, her mother and I revealed more and more each year to the point where she now knows as much as we do.

We hired a private social worker. We waited and waited and waited almost as long as we waited for Micah, our biological child. One day, while leaving work to drive home, I received a call saying a child would be born tomorrow. Wow! Tomorrow! It was so fast. Almost as little warning as water breaking. For forty-five minutes on the cell phone, we discussed whether we could have another child tomorrow. It was all too miraculous! As I pulled into the driveway, I hung-up the phone having just then decided together that we would say, "Yes!" The next day, we both took-off work. We spent all day in court. We signed all the papers. We were in such a rush! The maternity ward of the hospital closed at 4:00pm. We raced from the courthouse to St. Aiden's Hospital in downtown Durban. There she was. She was placed in our arms. She was tiny, perhaps premature. She had a little goop in her eye and a little diaper rash on her bum. She just slept, hard, all the

time. Micah at age two was at first absolutely baffled – he had no idea ‘what’, let alone ‘who’, was gently placed in the car seat next to him. He just stared at ‘it’ for the longest time. Gradually, he understood that ‘it’ was not an ‘it’, but rather a ‘her’. We have the photo of them, both sound asleep in their car seats, with his arm reaching-out, his little hand holding her, even littler, hand.

Friends, this story has been and will always be told with various degrees of accuracy, different levels of hyperbole, sometimes with details omitted, and sometimes with details added. Yet, essentially the same story will be told again and again each time Madeline and others ask how it was she came to be such a precious part of all our lives.

While the details may change with each new telling, the essence of the story will always be the same. Do you know why? Answer: Children don’t *really* care about the details. They don’t really even care so much about how or why. What children want to know is that *they matter*. They want to feel a part of something. Children want to know that they have purpose. And they want to hear about the people involved because they yearn for relationships and they want to love and they want to be loved. Madeline was never left alone; we were always with her from day one. **That’s why the story matters.** It’s not about historical accuracy. The legal and medical documents can provide all of that. Yet, all the

documents in the world cannot convey how much Madeline and Micah were both awaited and welcomed and how much they are loved and cherished. Only stories that can do all of that.

Last week, we focused on the Gospel of Luke because it focuses on Mary. This week, we read from Mathew because the writer of Matthew focuses on Joseph. The author of Matthew's gospel begins his story by saying, "This how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about."

The author of Matthew's gospel shares with us that Joseph apparently 'adopted' Jesus as we adopted my daughter. We learn from Matthew that he could have 'dismissed' Mary, rendering her disgraced, and perhaps even stoned. Jesus would have been considered a product of sin and thus likely would have perished, given the infant and child mortality rates at the time. Despite the fact that Joseph was not the biological father, he protected the nascent family. The story of Jesus' birth rightly characterizes Joseph as nurturing, caring, and protecting. For being a faithful and selfless spouse and father under difficult and embarrassing circumstances, the Catholic and Orthodox faith traditions declare Joseph to be a saint.

One of the tasks Madeline's mother and I had to accomplish *post haste* was name her so all the documents could be prepared. Madeline knows the various

names we considered for her. We desired in-part to give her an *isiZulu* name, for she would be raised in the country of her birth. Had we chosen an indigenous name, she would have been 'Mandisa'. We also desired in-part to give her an American name, as she would be born into a North American family and perhaps would live and work here. I know we considered the names 'Sierra' and 'Dakota'. In the end, we chose 'Madeline' because it was French and her last name, like Micah's, is French (Valiquette). We chose 'Madeline' because she, like sweet little girl in the *Madeline* series of children's books, would become a unique gem that captured everyone's hearts.

Madeline is a book series created by Ludwig Bemelmans. The series follows the daily adventures of Madeline, a seven-year-old girl attending a boarding school in Paris with eleven other girls, under the care of their teacher, Miss Clavel.¹ The *Madeline* series includes books entitled *Madeline in London* (where she has been) and *Madeline in America* where she is now.² Indeed, Madeline has indeed lived into her namesake having before travelled to Paris, France. She travels all around the world, seemingly at will, as today she is in Kentucky of all places visiting the iconic Churchill Downs.

¹ Wikipedia, "Madeline", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline_\(book_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline_(book_series)), accessed December 18, 2022.

²https://www.abebooks.com/Madelines-Book-Collection-Madeline-Rescue-Bad/31362048407/bd?cm_mmc=ggl-US_Shopp_Trade0to10--product_id=COM9780670771882USED--keyword=&gclid=CjwKCAiAkfucBhBBEiwAFjbrxJzitct92pT_3Cc4qawpMB2CLEONjNDW0b-9wIQLkWfAaqEzHKheBoCclQQAvD_BwE, accessed December 18, 2022.

All four gospels proclaim to us that the son of Mary and Joseph also lived into his namesake. The angels told Joseph that he should call his son 'Joshua' which in Hebrew means 'The Lord Saves'. The author of Matthew's gospel wrote in ancient Greek. Hence, 'Jesus' is the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Joshua'. Joseph and May would have been intimately aware of the many accounts in the Hebrew scriptures whereby The Lord delivered his people from hardship. As we learned last week when we learned about The Magnificat, if we reflect on the desperate circumstances in which Mary and Joseph lived under Roman occupation, it should come as no surprise that their son would be named, almost subversively, 'The Lord Saves'.

But the narrative tells a *deeper* theological point with names. Although the son shall be called 'Jesus' by his family, others will call him 'Immanuel' which in Hebrew means 'God is with us'. The name 'Immanuel' is derived from one of Isaiah's prophecies that reads, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: the virgin is with child and she will bear a son, and [they] will call his name Immanuel" (7:14). Now, I could bore you to tears with academic details about how this prophesy was written for an ancient King named Ahaz or about how the Hebrew word translated Hebrew word 'virgin' actually only means 'young

woman'.³ But, none of that really matters! Those are simply details, accurate or inaccurate, that are intended to convey the theological truth that "God is with us".⁴ The Bible, with all of its beauty and flaws, conveys not primarily historical truths, but, most importantly, spiritual truths. If we become consumed with the somewhat unimportant historical details, we risk entirely missing the fundamental and essential spiritual truths.

When telling a story of how a child came to be, the details of 'how' it happened are not important. Instead, the details, accurate or inaccurate, are used to communicate to 'him', 'her', or 'they' that they are not alone, they belong and are loved. Likewise, we tell the nativity story to remind us that we matter to God, we are saved by God, and we are deeply loved by God. The story tells us that through Jesus, 'God is with us' and shall never leave us. That, my friends, *is the point* of the story.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".

³ For many commentaries, see *Bible Hub*, "Matthew 1:23", found at: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/1-23.htm>, accessed December 18, 2022.

⁴ John Buchanan, "Fourth Sunday of Advent" in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, eds. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald Allen, and Dale Andrews (Louisville, KY, Westminster Knox Press, 2013), 26 and 30.