

**SAINT JOSEPH; MATTHEW 1:18-25; ADVENT IV, DECEMBER 18, 2016;  
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Today's story from Matthew is a story of the head and the heart. Clearly our hearts were engaged as our children re-enacted the birth of the Christ child. Even a cold rationalist would be hard pressed to remain unmoved by those angels and shepherds invading this makeshift stable.

We're Presbyterians. We don't let our guard down very often – the Christmas pageant, a baptism, maybe a wedding – but otherwise we're good soldiers; we obey the law, adhere to well-established principles, do our best to fulfill the expectations of citizenship, neighborliness, and decorum.

But then, every once in a while, our hearts get moved. We see an infant or toddler in the arms of Mr. Chris with a helium balloon tied around her little wrist signifying one of the bright stars on that first Christmas night and the spirit of the season rushes into our souls; the rigid rules and dry dictates of shoulds and oughts turn soft and malleable; we do something 'out of character' – we write a big check for the Christmas offering or we play secret Santa for someone in need or we let go of a long-standing grudge and make amends.

Today's story from Matthew is about a birth, which I will get to, but it is also about the tension between Joseph's head and heart as he learns about Mary's pregnancy.

Tension between head and heart is a good thing. If there is no tension we end up, like Scrooge, standing on some principle of profit and loss or any principle for that matter, and run the risk of denying ourselves the joy of giving.

Or, if every emotion dictates every action we enter a world of no boundaries where chaos and confusion reign.

So we have this story from Matthew to help navigate the shoals where head and heart are in conflict. You see, Matthew was writing to Jewish Christians, who, to oversimplify for discussion purposes, unlike Gentile Christians in the early church, lived every day in the tension between head and heart.

These early Christians were good Jews; they observed all 613 rules of Torah; and yet, they also encountered, in the ministry of the early church, the new commandment Jesus gave to his disciples 'to love one another'; this law of love opened them up, gave them a sense of relevance and of seizing the day.

The law of love, as Jesus practiced it, trumped the law of Torah – like when he healed someone on the Sabbath and the Pharisees said work was forbidden on that day; but Jesus replied it is more important to follow the spirit than the letter of the law; and with that judgment life suddenly got more exciting and complicated. The spirit and the letter, the heart and the head could be in conflict but rather than siding with the scholars for the primacy of the head, Jesus endorsed the higher court and authority of the heart that discerns, like a depth marker, the purpose and meaning of life; thus Jesus gave needed balance to a religion turned rigid; and started a movement of his own.

Matthew alone records this little scandal of conception out of wedlock; I'm glad he did because it speaks not just to first century Jewish Christians but to Presbyterians who know about following rules and staying in our heads to avoid our hearts.

Matthew is saying to his readers, look this guy Joseph is one of us. Put yourself in his shoes: he discovers the woman to whom he is engaged is pregnant and not by him. Because he is a good man he decides the honorable thing to do is to end the engagement quietly as the law gives him the right to do.

But beneath this perfectly acceptable legal arrangement what is going on in Joseph's heart? *Jolted* might be an understatement. It is so out of character for Mary – at least the Mary with whom he shared dreams of raising a family, running his small carpentry and construction business, getting involved in the PTA, serving on the synagogue outreach committee. Then comes this breach of trust and violation of their relationship.

If this were a Hallmark movie Joseph would be at home, in his bachelor apartment, leafing through an album of photographs of Mary and him together – at the high school prom, in the stands at the chariot races, hiking on Mt. Hermon.

If this were a Clint Eastwood film Joseph would be sitting alone at a blue collar bar or shooting pool at the American Legion drowning his sorrows in alcohol, staying as far from Mary as possible.

In the Hallmark version, after a soothing cup of hot cocoa, he turns out the reading lamp by the bed and tries to get some sleep; or in the Eastwood movie he stumbles through the parking lot, in the dark, back to his car and a strange thing happens. Matthew puts it this way: "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

I have talked with more than a few of you who have encountered voices, angels, deceased members of your family, or people very much in the here and now who have communicated some message you needed to hear at some critical juncture and you heard their advice with your heart, took a chance, and it made all the difference.

Joseph had every reason, including saving face, to divorce Mary, yet he knows in his heart that is not the right thing to do; so he forgoes his legal rights, listens to the angel speaking in and through his heart, and weds Mary.

Whether the voice of the angel in your heart, or that of a friend or therapist it is in such moments when the stakes are high and there's the morally, socially acceptable way out, or, the more difficult, risky action that voice is urging us to take that we find ourselves at Robert Frost's two roads diverging in a wood; this is the nexus of discipleship. And nowhere is this either/or as clearly as conveyed as in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, "you have heard it said, but I say to you...." as he reveals the challenge of living an authentic life using the Ten Commandments as spiritual guides rather than a legal checklist.

'You have heard it said you shall not murder, or commit adultery, or swear falsely, and that you may take an eye for an eye, but I say to you...' and then Jesus tells us what we already know in our hearts.

If you think badly of another person or defame them in gossip are you not committing an act of murder; if you think lustfully of another are you not already engaged in the spirit of adultery; if you make a promise you have no intention of keeping or speak falsely of your brother or sister for the sake of gossip have you not lied, and if though the law says to love your neighbor and hate your enemy and that you may exact an eye for an eye how will peace ever come if we do not also learn how to love our enemies?

Jesus calls us to live according to the spirit of the law not to hide behind its letter even when we have every right and it would be acceptable to do so. But our hearts where we are made in the image of God and Jeremiah says they shall know that I am God discern the best path. And Joseph who appears at the start of his story is Matthew's way of saying this gospel is about living an authentic, spirit-guided life.

Let me say a word about the virgin birth. Matthew uses this Hellenistic myth found elsewhere in ancient literature to portray Jesus as the new Moses – also born under special circumstances – so that when Matthew's Jewish Christian church reads his gospel they will recognize in Jesus the figure of Moses.

Rather than attempting to prove that Jesus is the Son of God the miraculous birth actually fades from the story and is never mentioned again. Matthew has other ways to identify Jesus as the Son of God; the narrative of Jesus' birth is a clue to the role he will play in God's plan to save humanity. Just as God was at work through Moses to save the people from slavery to Pharaoh, Jesus will deliver his people from slavery to sin.

But the final, great take away from the birth story is that this Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." To talk about Jesus is to talk about God, to receive Jesus is to receive God; to gather or serve in the name of Jesus is to gather and serve in the presence and name of God.

The timing of the lectionary cycle which gives us the story of Joseph once every three years comes none too soon this year. As we enter 2017, we will be confronted with many opportunities to weigh the tension between our head and heart.

You hear lots of people doing it now out loud with regard to the recent election. Members of the media, pundits and press are raising serious questions about the impending White House administration. Some are saying not to worry, it's just another election cycle, everything will be fine; others see the handwriting of a kleptocracy designed to enrich a few and disenfranchise millions of white and non-white poor people not to mention the earth itself.

Another word for making the heart the higher court and authority of in matters of faith and conscience is moral courage. It takes moral courage to do what Joseph does, it takes moral courage to stand up rather than stand down when the welfare and wellbeing of the sick, the poor, the imprisoned, and the immigrant is treated unjustly.

There does, on the other hand, seem to be more agreement that what is needed in our nation now are small acts of courage and kindness, neighbor to neighbor, husband to wife, parent to child, employer to employee; small acts inspired by the higher court and authority of the heart that build relationships at the grassroots and bring healing where we live and work and play.

I heard a talk last week that encouraged us to 'live small' – that is, to stay within ourselves rather than get swept up in the rhetoric and hype of hate or the bluster of bigotry and bullying or for that matter the cold feud or ancient grudge or resentment of victimhood.

The problem with living by the letter of the law, or staying in our head to avoid our heart is that we are confined to social and emotional silos that undermine community. Life gets lonely and skewed in a silo.

But Joseph, listening to his heart, asked the question, "What would it look like if Mary and I stuck to our plan and welcomed this new child into our family?"

Because they did, the baby boy Mary delivered into the world was raised in a good home, confirmed in his faith and came of age speaking truth to power and healing to the people and nation.

You never know what will happen when you listen to your heart and follow the spirit of God's law; if you get past thinking the worst or what people might say or all the ways you could fail, you just might make the difference in someone's life; you might even be part of a chain of events – call it God's will – that ends up saving the world. Amen.