

Covenant Word

Looking for a Sign

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:(1-17) 18-25
(inference to Luke 2:12)

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
December 23, 2007*

When my father died, there were many details of which to take care. As executor, my sister, Mary Helen, had the vast majority of this responsibility. One of the decisions focused on 6 burial plots at Elmwood Cemetery. Our siblings, who both lived out of the state at the time, were not interested. So Mary Helen and I decided to divide them between our families.

We Dixons and Sheltons are known for our easy demeanors, so why not spend eternity next to one another when we have done pretty well together here on earth?

We made an appointment with the folks at Elmwood Cemetery. We sat in a small, stale room with the distinct odor of cigarettes reeking from the sales representative. When he finally realized that our grief was not fresh, his morose demeanor quickly switched to one of all business. We looked over the map of the Cemetery to locate our corner of eternal rest. The salesman explained how the six plots were divided. We talked amicably about which we might want and then we made our choices. It never dawned on us to go look at the plots *before* we made our decisions. We carefully wrote on our maps which would belong to each of us. Then we signed the paper work making the transfer legally binding.

As we walked back to the car, we decided that we really should take a few more minutes, drive to the plots and just see them. We were there, why not? It did not take us long to find the future spot of our celestial condos. As we rechecked our maps, we began to realize that right in the middle of the Dixon plots, was a 15 foot pine tree! As Mary Helen investigated the predicament, I decided to lie down. She whipped around and asked in her big sister voice, "What in the world are you doing?" My reply was: "I'm just trying it on for size!"

Now the majority of our ancestors are buried at The Belleville Baptist Church in Conecuh County. We

can go there to not only visit our parents, Hermione and Lamar, but to see the old maid twins, Gussie and Fee. As they aged, they lost a battle with kudzu so that the entire house was covered with the vine. They lived in only two rooms of the house. A little further over, there is great grandmother Hermione Stoutemire Farnham, who always wore lace caps to cover her bald head. A gene I am grateful not to have inherited. And just beyond her grave, there is great grandfather John Milton Farnham who moved the family from the farm into the city so that all of his children could attend school.

The first time I took Dan to this cemetery, he sat on my mother's grave and ran his fingers over the letters of her maiden name. "D-A-N-N-E-L-L-Y, look Mama, it's my name! It's my name too!"

The genealogy of Jesus, found in Matthew's gospel, allows us this same privilege. We visit the cemetery, read through the names and remember the stories of these individuals. All too easily, we recognize ourselves in their stories of exclusion and inclusion, sin and redemption, judgment and grace.

Matthew fences the ancestors of Jesus inside a family cemetery as he lists the genealogy. When we visit it, we find, at the entrance, the

patriarch Father Abraham. Fred Craddock says that on this man of faith's tombstone we might read, "He was a pilgrim on the earth seeking a city with foundations whose builder and maker is God." (Fred Craddock, "God is With Us," The Cherry Log Sermons) Next to Abraham is his son, Isaac, and then, grandson, Jacob. Jacob dared to wrestle God in order to receive a blessing and as a result, he limped the remainder of his days. There is no marker for Sarah, wife of Abraham. There is no marker for Rebekah, wife of Isaac and there is no marker for Rachel, wife of Jacob for whom he labored 14 years. Knowing how they felt about women back in those days, this is not too surprising to us. So what is surprising are the names of the women who are included. We quickly discover and take some comfort in the fact that Jesus, like the rest of us, has a few skeletons in His closet!

- For there is Tamar who was more clever than chaste. She disguised herself as a prostitute and offered herself to her father-in-law. Not recognizing her, he unknowingly fulfilled his levirate obligation. She conceived and bore twins.
- There is Rahab, a prostitute of Jericho, who hid Joshua's spies on the roof of her house when soldiers came after them.
- There is Ruth, whose devotion to her mother-in-law has been sung about at weddings for hundreds of years. And there is Bathsheba. Actually, her name is not

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant

Where Faith Comes to Life.

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

used at all. She is simply called "Uriah's wife." Uriah was away at war when King David saw Bathsheba bathing on her roof. An affair ensued which climaxed with the death of Uriah when, by command of King David, he was transferred to the front lines of battle. King David did marry Bathsheba, so it is interesting that she is listed not as "King David's wife," (which held the greatest prestige), not as "Bathsheba," (which was her actual name), but as "Uriah's wife," putting her unfaithfulness back into public view.

Perhaps the writer of Matthew's gospel was being prophetic by including these women. Was he trying to point us to a coming day, through Jesus, that the distinctions of male and female would no longer matter? None of these women are Jewish either. Tamar was an Arab. Bathsheba was a Palestinian. Ruth was Jordanian. Not a one of them was Jewish. Maybe this is prophetic too, announcing that the One who comes at the end of the genealogy, Jesus of Nazareth, would bring it to pass that the blessings of God are to be showered on all people. (Craddock)

One of the larger markers in the cemetery is for Judah. He gave his name to his people, the Jews. We also cannot miss the sepulcher for King David... shepherd, musician, poet, soldier, and king. Then, there is a long line of kings who, for generations, struggled with the compromise of idol worship and little, if any, conviction that the Hebrew God was to be worshiped as supreme.

Last of all is a plain marker found in a remote corner. It simply reads, "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." The writer then tells us his story. (Exegesis from Craddock)

Joseph was engaged to a woman named Mary. Now remember, engagement back then was a legal matter. You did not get engaged under the Christmas tree or in a helicopter or at the theatre. Engagement was serious legal business. Because it was binding in nature, it could only be broken by going to the courts. Sometimes the engagements would last for years with two families coming together, signing papers and waiting for the couple to finally come of age so that they could be married. So Joseph was engaged to Mary. The only problem was that she was pregnant, and Joseph was not the father.

Joseph was a good and righteous man. He was a man who wanted to do the right thing when he finds out that his fiancée is pregnant. What should he do? When you are in crisis, how do you know what is the right response? When what you have dreamed of, waited for, hoped and planned for suddenly turns sour, what is the right thing to do? He was a carpenter, established in the community, engaged to a woman named Mary, and it is evident that she is pregnant. He is not the father. What is Joseph to do?

One option is to consult with those whose opinion you trust. Somerset Maugham once said that the most fundamental and

strongest disposition of the human spirit in civilized society is to get the approval of the people around you. So we send out emails and ask "What do you think I ought to do?" We get on our phones to either talk or text and then we talk about it, polling everybody. "Did you hear about Mary? What do you think I ought to do?" Looking for direction, we spread the news everywhere. But not Joseph. He is determined not to disgrace Mary in any way. He will not expose or humiliate her.

I am so very grateful for the example of Joseph. He is a good, God-fearing man, but he differs from his church friends. He rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time, for he reads the scriptures through a certain kind of lens. It is a lens that brings out the loving and kind character of God's nature.

Joseph has many well-meaning, godly friends with whom he worships at the local synagogue. They are full of advice that focuses on scripture. They offer righteous advice like "Just do what the Bible says. You can't go wrong if you do what is in the Scripture." The problem with this advice is found in Deuteronomy 22 when it says, "She is to be taken out and stoned to death in front of the people." That is what the Bible says, so should Joseph do it?

I find it amazing the justifications that good, well-intentioned people find in scripture. They take the Bible and open it up, almost at will, and say, "Here's the verse that will clear everything up! An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Throw the switch! End that life!"

The Bible says, "The sexually immoral, the idolaters, the adulterers, the male prostitutes, the homosexuals, the thieves, the greedy... on and on... will not inherit the kingdom of God. Rather, they will burn in the fiery lake of burning sulfur." That's what the Bible says.

"If a man finds anything displeasing in his wife, let him give her a divorce and send her out of the house." Thank you husband for not believing everything the Bible says!

"Let the women keep their heads covered and their mouths shut." That's what the Bible says. Do we need book, chapter and verse? "Just do what the Bible says."

Perhaps when Mary told Joseph the news that she was pregnant, perhaps he went looking for a sign.

I am so very grateful for the example of Joseph. He is a good, God-fearing man, but he differs from his church friends. He rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time, for he reads the scriptures through a certain kind of lens. It is a lens that brings out the loving and kind character of God's nature. Therefore, he says, "I will not harm her. I will not abuse, expose, shame, ridicule, or demean her. I will value her dignity and worth. I will protect her." Is there a chapter and verse to support this? No, it is just enacting the very nature and character of God! And only someone who seeks to know God on intimate terms can come to such a conclusion. Like Joseph, we are to read the Holy writ through the spectacles of God's grace and goodness and love.

Perhaps when Mary told Joseph the news that she was pregnant, perhaps he went looking for a sign. We too are prone to do this.

"If I am to get out of this relationship, send me a sign," we pray. "If I am to take this job, send me a sign that it is the right move to make for my career." "If this is the person I am supposed to spend the rest of my life with, send me a sign!"

Lloyd's mother did this once. She told her husband that she wanted a new car. His response was, "You don't need a new car." "But I want a new car. I want a Cadillac...and not just any Cadillac, I want a blue Cadillac." He remained steady. "You don't need a new car."

So one Saturday morning, she got up and announced to the family. "I am going downtown and if there is a parking place right in front of the dealership, I will take that as my sign that it is ok to buy a blue Cadillac!" There was a parking place, and she drove home in a blue Cadillac after putting all the paper work in her husband's name!

It has been drummed into us since childhood that we are not to put the Lord our God to the test, and asking for a sign would seem to fall into this category. But in the Old Testament reading for today, God switches gears on us and gives to King Ahaz (and to us as well) a sign. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him, Immanuel." Interestingly, it is what the angels tell the shepherds as well. "And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

We are accustomed to signs being out of the ordinary: burning bushes, the parting of large bodies of water, the sea creature Leviathan...but here, God gives us a most common sight...a pregnant woman and a baby. God's best signs, in my opinion, are like that. They are ordinary enough to have on hand every day so that we are constantly reminded of God's active presence in our lives. Think about these consistently recurring mnemonics.

- We see a rainbow and remember: *Never again will I destroy the earth.*
- We see the stars in the heavens and remember: *I will make your descendents as numerous as the stars in the heavens.*
- We reach for yeast: *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in a measure of flour.*

We sweep with a broom: *The kingdom of God is like a woman who has lost a coin, and so she sweeps out the whole house looking for it.*

With this pregnant woman, with this child, God is instigating another one of those signs, because now, we are not going to be able to look at another pregnant woman, or another child, without remembering: *His name is Emmanuel: God with us.* (Anna Carter Florence, "Preaching the Lesson," Lectionary Homiletics, 12-23-07)

It's likely to change the way we deal with people, isn't it? If every child reminds us that God is with us, and that God's love is deeper than Sheol and higher than the heavens, then we can't help

but treat one another differently. (Anna Carter Florence)

Maybe that is a part of what drove Joseph's decision to treat Mary kindly. I would imagine that God's angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream helped too: "I want you to go ahead and marry this woman. I want you to take good care of her. I have chosen you to raise my Son. I need you, a man who

understands my nature to be loving kindness, to care for this baby."

It makes me feel good About Christmas to know that this man will do the right thing. It feels good to read his tombstone and know that when Jesus was born,

It makes me feel good About Christmas to know that this man will do the right thing. ... It seems to me that when you have somebody like Joseph in your life, it is such a gift that it feels like Christmas. I believe that Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says, "I don't care what your opinion is. I don't care what the Bible might say. I am not looking for a sign. I am going to do what is right."

this man, Joseph, taught him and raised him and cared for him and showed him how to be a carpenter. Joseph took Jesus to the synagogue, taught him the Bible, and showed him how to be an ethical man who was dedicated to doing the right thing. It seems to me that when you have somebody like Joseph in your life, it is such a gift that it feels like Christmas. I believe that Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says, "I don't care what your opinion is. I don't care what the Bible might say. I am not looking for a sign. I am going to do what is right." (Craddock)

So I'm wondering about your tombstone. When future generations tromp around in our cemetery, what will they find there? I am hoping that they will read on my grave: "She dedicated her life to doing what was right—not what others thought; not what the Bible necessarily said; not what the signs said. She did what she knew was right." The question, of course, is how will your marker read. The choice is up to you.