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**Let Us Adore Him**  
***LOVE***

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12/18/22  
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## Let Us Adore Him: Love Matthew 1:18-25

Haven't we been enjoying some amazing music! Thank you to our musicians and tech team! And there's more to come in just a moment. But we wanted to take a few moments to pause and reflect.

We all know and have seen the declaration that Jesus is the reason for the season. And while that's true, sadly, Jesus doesn't show up much in the top Christmas songs played on Spotify. According to data from last year, the top 100 most-played Christmas songs around the world is Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas," followed by Wham!'s "Last Christmas," and then Ariana Grande's "Santa Tell Me." Some top songs make oblique references to the religious aspect of Christmas, but most stick to love, the weather, and an occasional chestnut. The most popular ones that *do* mention Jesus come in at numbers 71, 79, and 90.

Thankfully that isn't the case here this morning! But if our society's music, advertisements, and practices are any indicator, it seems like we've sanitized Jesus right out of Christmas; the season has become a social and commercial holiday instead of about Jesus. If there *does* happen to be anything predominantly religious, well, we expect shepherds in fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. We expect innkeepers with stables full of soft, sweet-smelling hay. We expect a cleanly dressed pregnant Mary on the brink of delivering her child. And we have come to anticipate it all wrapped in wonder, beauty, and nostalgic simplicity. Most of our nativity scenes are clean and crisp: angelic faces, resting animals, a clean stable. Even the Christmas carol, "Away in a Manger" claims the baby Jesus did not cry! We've removed the messy humanity of it – messiness like the reality of the fluids at birth, Mary's swollen feet that come with third-trimester pregnancy, the stench of a cattle stall and the general noise and messiness.

Author Philip Yancey writes this about God entering the mess: "How did Christmas day feel to God? Imagine for a moment becoming a baby again: giving up language and muscle coordination, and the ability to eat solid food and control your bladder (and bowels). God as a fetus! ... On that day in Bethlehem, the Maker of All That Is took form as a helpless, (messy,) dependent newborn."<sup>1</sup> But we still want to sanitize the story into a nice, clean, creche or manger scene.

We also tend to sanitize the family dynamics Jesus was born into. Matthew chapter one, however, is not a sanitized story at all. In fact, it plunges us right into the messy dysfunctional family dynamics that Jesus was born into. A betrothed and supposed virgin

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 2002), p. 106

ends up pregnant, and the man she is engaged to finds out. This is a mess in a culture and religion that allows for the stoning of adulteresses. This is a messy place for a husband who is filled with love and compassion but also righteousness and dedication to his faith. On this last Sunday of Advent before Christmas, we reflect on the theme of love, demonstrated and delivered when God entered our messes.

Maybe, despite our nostalgic feelings toward the shepherds and angels of Luke 2, this passage in Matthew is the perfect passage for us to talk about the love of God that is so great that he not only entered the world in a stable but also entered into the messy humanness and dysfunctional family dynamics.

If you've read Matthew chapter one, you know that it is a long list of the genealogy that leads up to Jesus. I'm not going to read it (phew!), but I do want to quickly point out some things from it.

Matthew 1 begins with the lineage of Jesus showing that he is a descendent of King David, so he's got that going for him on his resume, but that doesn't mean it wasn't messy – far from it!

First see in that lineage list of names it mentions four women by name, and even a fifth is alluded to: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife (whom we know as Bathsheba), and Mary. Lists of lineages *never* included women. But Jesus' did! Of these women, the first was involved in an incest scandal, the second was a prostitute, the third was a Moabite (which the Jewish people considered about as bad as being a prostitute), the fourth was trapped by a mess of abuse of power and rape and adultery by King David, and the fifth turned up pregnant before marriage. Not exactly impeccable pedigree!

Then Joseph and Mary are both named in the lineage. Naming Mary as his mother emphasizes the virgin birth. Naming Joseph as his father connects Jesus to the royal line of David, which is important because it shows that Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah 23:5 that the Jewish messiah would be a descendant of David.

Joseph appears in the genealogy as the father of Jesus before Matthew even tells about Jesus's birth, despite the drama surrounding Mary's premarital pregnancy. This tells us Joseph would be the adoptive human father for Jesus.

So Jesus was born into a mess! God must really love us to enter right into the dysfunction of our families.

Take for example Joseph and Mary's engagement. Engagements in the first century were not like engagements today. A betrothal was a contract between families. It was not "let's plan to get married" but meant "our marriage has begun." Usually money or goods were exchanged in the betrothal stage as a down payment. Because of that, engagements were difficult to call off because it was a contract, and part of the whole marriage plan. So ending an engagement required a divorce and a breach of contract. To break a contract like that often left the woman destitute and dependent on her family of origin – if they hadn't already rejected her for shame.

While they were engaged, the wife did not live with her husband (not until the marriage was complete) but still they were expected to live in fidelity to each other as if they were married. During this time the husband would build a house for the new family and set

things up to prepare for the wife to move in after the marriage ceremony and celebration. Joseph was a builder, so you can be sure he was building the best house to be their new home.

But unfaithfulness to that engagement was grounds for stoning. Women who were caught in adultery were ushered outside of town to be stoned to death so their dead bodies wouldn't make the town unclean. Mary would have been viewed by her entire community as unfaithful, and they would have had no reason *not* to think so. They had no frame of reference to believe in or understand the Holy Spirit's involvement.

When Joseph found out, we can be confident that he assumed she had committed adultery with another man. Imagine the devastating disappointment this would have caused Joseph as he was in the midst of lovingly building their new home.

The fact that Joseph decided to divorce Mary is not what matters. In his culture and religion, he had every right to divorce her for bringing shame to his family! What matters is that he decided to divorce her *quietly*. He could have called for her stoning, humiliating her in front of the entire community and justifying himself. But divorcing her quietly was a compassionate choice. It was the best he could do to protect her in the mess. Joseph's goodness shined through even in the mess.

God knew about all the mess, and he knew that his entering would make a mess. But God in his love delivers through and from messes! He entered in this part of the story through an angel – a messenger from God – who arrives to explain to Joseph that Mary wasn't unfaithful— this is a child born of the Holy Spirit. God is at work bringing his love into the mess!

This is about God entering the mess of humanity. Jesus enters the world, born of ordinary human beings with ordinary human struggles. This was not a pristine family without issues, even though we often paint them that way. We tend to want to focus on their faithfulness and ignore their humanity. Even though they *were* faithful, their path was not easy, and their life was not free of burden and mess.

The incarnation is not just about Jesus being born in a stable instead of a palace. It's also about proximity and experience, and God entering the messiness of human relationships. Jesus took on humanity in all its fullness from Day 1, including the dynamics of family dysfunction.

The love of God does not shun from nor run from our humanity or our messes but enters and embraces and redeems them. We can have confidence that, if God willingly entered a complicated messy family dynamic at Jesus' birth, then our situations aren't too much for God. There is no mess that God won't enter to bring his love into your life and relationships and world.

The Advent narrative—the story of hope and anticipation—is ultimately bathed in the love of God. We trust God because God loves us. The story of Christmas—the story of the incarnation—is one that doesn't run from conflict, pain, or humanness but embraces all the mess of humanity out of love.

We are loved. No matter the mess we are in, whether it be of our own making or someone else's. Maybe it's even a mess that has been created because we are seeking to be faithful to

God, and the people around us just don't see the full picture. God is present with us in the midst of all of it! So on this final Sunday of Advent, we look ahead in the knowledge that we are loved. We have hope in the face of uncertainty because we are loved by God. No matter where we are, no matter what lies ahead, this is the heart of the message: "For God so loved the world, that he sent his Son" into our messes, that we might know and be known by him.

*Prayer*