

From Generation to Generation: We Can Choose A Better Way Matthew 1:18-25

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Fort Snelling National Cemetery is the final resting place for over a quarter of a million service men and women, including my parents. Since 2016 when my dad died, and his and my mom's ashes were interred there, whenever I officiate a graveside service for a grieving family, I go a little early and spend a few quiet moments at my parent's grave. And I often think how each grave marker is like the title of a book which contains the birth date, the death date, and what their families have decided is essential for the rest of us to know about their loved one: "Devoted Father and husband, loving wife, and mother, beloved daughter or son, brother, sister, friend." Every grave marker provides a glimpse into the who, what, where, and when of that person's life. So when my dad died and was buried at Fort Snelling, I chose three words to bring closure to his and my mom's lives: Honor, Love, Adventure.

I've been gathering with families at the gravesides of their loved ones for a long time. I'm always moved by the stories of deep joy and gratitude, along with memories of profound pain and sadness. And I realize that every one of those markers tells a story that will be passed on from each generation to the next.

We're in a series that we're calling Generation to Generation. During this Advent season, we're looking at how God's vision of hope and wholeness has been passed from generation to generation, from each person to the next. Two weeks ago, we waded through a huge list of characters from Matthew's Gospel. Pastor Jeff took us on a genealogical journey from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Rebekah, Sarah, and Rachel, from Jesse, David, and Solomon, to Tamar, Ruth, and Naomi. Last week, we encountered the story of Mary and the stunning news she received from an angel named Gabriel about a baby named Jesus. The people in all those ancient stories – like every one of the over 250,000 "stories" at Fort Snelling National Cemetery are essential storylines in God's beautiful and ongoing story of love. As each of the Advent stories in our series unfolds, we're considering what each character passed on to the next generation. It's important to appreciate how each character played a part in God's activity of liberation and love or how they got in the way of that. We also want to acknowledge how our lives, histories, actions, and stories are interconnected and woven.

The root word of the word "generation" is "gen" which means "origin" or "birth." So, when we hear generative and life-giving stories, there is often a call to action. We

want to be part of that movement, so we ask ourselves what we're being called to generate, to bring forth. While we consider the stories passed on to our generation, it's just as important to consider what we're passing on to the next generation. So, we pause and identify our spiritual mentors who planted the seeds for what is now blooming. And just as importantly – if not more so, what seeds are we planting now for the next generation?

Today I want to take all of this a step further as we look at the story of Mary and Joseph as they grapple with the reality of a pregnancy that, in one moment, seems like an interruption with massive implications, but in the next moment, an invitation of biblical proportions. Let's look at the story together. [Matthew 1:18-25]

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah. Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, 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." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This is one very complicated story. We can hardly imagine. But we're going to try anyway. Here's what we know from a couple of angles: On the one hand, Mary is a teenager. Not only that but a pregnant teenager. And not only that, Mary was a pregnant teenager in the 1st century, meaning she was powerless, without agency, and without voice.

On the other hand, from an entirely different perspective, God chose Mary, this young, powerless, voiceless young woman without agency or influence to give birth to hope for the world. The child within her would save the people from the power of death and provide the way for the power of life to prevail. The savior, Jesus, would replace chaos with peace and heartache with joy. Jesus, the light of the world within her, would scatter the darkness and cause hate to dissolve in the power of love. Mary was chosen by the power of God to impact the world from generation to generation. With each successive generation, stories are told that both shine a light on the past and illuminate the future. Because Jesus' story is intertwined with our stories, we always have the power to choose a better way forward. Let me share some perspectives that will help us move forward.

First, let's acknowledge that Interruptions can lead to Invitations. We all have choices. Every day we face life-and-death decisions. I don't mean to overstate that, but we face opportunities to bring more life and aliveness to our lives and the world around us every day. Sometimes we choose wisely. Sometimes we don't. An important step toward more life and aliveness is to reframe our perspective of life events from interruptions to invitations. At the risk of mixing metaphors, every one of us has a story, and every story from our lives is a sacred thread in the tapestry of God's love. Every story, every chapter, every thread belongs. Let me say that again, every narrative in every one of our stories belongs. But seeing every strand belonging to God's tapestry of love can be challenging.

For some, there are strands we'd just as soon cover up or cut out altogether. For others of us, we see whole chapters of our stories as massive interruptions. Hopes that were abandoned, dreams that were dashed, plans that were interrupted. For still others, looking at the artwork of our lives is like looking at the tapestry from the underside. All we see is a mess of knots and loose, frayed ends. Grandparents and parents, think of the stories you could tell your kids and grandkids about your life when you were their age. What stories would you tell them? What narratives would you judiciously leave out? What stories from your life that, at one time, seemed like an impossible interruption have emerged as invitations all these years later?

Mary probably wrestled with all of that. Joseph probably did too. But God took what seemed like an interruption and turned it into an invitation. In my imagination, I see Mary and Joseph huddled together quietly, working through their challenges, quietly reminding one another that God had their best interest in mind. Advent is the season to see things from a new perspective, to see interruptions as invitations to new beginnings and a new way of life.

Advent is the season to anticipate all the ways God partners with us to bring hope, wholeness, life, and aliveness to future generations through the story of Jesus' birth. Some of the most powerful ways we choose a better way is to see how the birth of Jesus replaces chaos with peace, turns heartache into joy, chases away the darkness with light, and causes hate to dissolve in the power of love. Seeing interruptions as invitations in our lives changes us. As we learn to tell those stories, we can choose a better way that impacts future generations.

Second, three important questions can equip us to choose a better way. First, when we think about choosing a better way, what are you being called to generate, to bring forth? The birth of Jesus is far more than just another holiday in the year. The celebration of the birth of Christ is intended to have a generative impact on

others – those we know and those we do not know. How will you express that? Who will be the ones to be inspired by God's creativity through you? The most challenging question I face each year is how to take this story that is so deeply familiar to me and convey it to others to whom it is not familiar.

Let me give you an example. The devotional book, *Welcome the Seasons* lived in my imagination for several years before it became a reality. I had written a collection of short stories in response to a deep longing to experience more of the wonder of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany at a pace that helped people dwell in the rich beauty of each day. But I knew I couldn't do all of that on my own. So I created a partnership with several teams, nearly a hundred others, including the Pastoral team, the Worship Arts team, the Editing, and Creative Writing teams, the Communications and Media Arts teams, the Artists and Photography teams, and all of the musicians. The generative work that so many people did has now had an impact on people around the world. We've shared a story again this year that is deeply familiar to some and have been able to convey it to others to whom it is not familiar. My question is this: how will you convey the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection to others?

Second, when we think about choosing a better way, who are the spiritual mentors who planted the seeds for what is now emerging for you? Taking time to identify the mentors in our lives is a powerful exercise. We are moved toward gratitude when we acknowledge others for modeling healthy choices. And gratitude always creates a better way forward. So let me ask: who has impacted your life significantly? Who would you say is most responsible for you being on this faith journey? What if one of the gifts you gave at Christmas was a gift of gratitude to that person, those people? What if you spent some time carefully crafting a thank you, then wrapped that up and gave it as a gift? My challenge is to do that and see what happens.

One more: when we think about choosing a better way, what seeds are you planting now for the next generation? Taking some time in the days ahead to be specifically intentional about how you can choose a better way will impact the lives of those around you and will nurture your faith. So here's my challenge for you this week. Set aside time each day to read scripture and respond to thoughtful questions. I've created the *Five Day Devo/Resource* to guide you.

Whenever I go to Fort Snelling National Cemetery to meet with a family at a graveside, I stop at the columbarium, where my parents are interred. I go through this exercise where I acknowledge why I'm there – to walk a family through their grief.

I acknowledge that I can do that – I can feel empathy and give care, in part because Gene and Joyce Gauche modeled that for me. And I know that whatever happens in the following 20 minutes at a graveside can hugely impact at least one family and possibly for generations to come.