

SERMON  
First Lutheran Church  
Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 1:18-25  
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
December 22, 2013

It was Monday morning last week. I was still reflecting upon **Pastor Steve Thompson's** preaching about "**Enough.**" I will not soon forget his illustration about God's people being the "**down-filled coat**" that embraces folks when they have to face into a **cold, stiff wind of hurt, loss or trouble.** He said that **we are that down-filled coat** for each other.

After our fourth winter-impacted-worship service of the week, I had seen what looked to be disappointing results from our pledge cards turned in. We were something like **\$150,000 short** of what we will need to even match our current expenses. I prayed, "**What will happen now Lord? What shall I do?**" It wasn't until a couple of days later that I learned that those early pledgers had actually increased their own personal commitments to our mission by almost **\$50,000.** I knew that more pledges were yet to come in.

Again, it was Monday, my day off. I was moping around the house doing chores and nursing a long-time, sore shoulder. Then I received a call from the church notifying me that one of our families had just lost a loved one.

The next day, Tuesday, I had the privilege of attending the **K-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Christmas Program** at Rippleside Elementary School. **Jennifer Johnson** and **Sharon Eder** from our church led the choirs. Many others of our members were there as teachers, helpers and parents. I recognized many of the kids that we see in worship each week. I noted that these little ones only sang **secular Christmas songs** – you know - separation of church and state. The songs and singing were wonderful. The kids were proud of what they were sharing with us. We heard about **visits from Santa** and **sleighs** and about little **snowflakes** - that though each is unique, **will all soon be gone again.** I think that God wanted me to be at that concert...

Our God-given mission here at First Lutheran is to **make sure that our little ones get a visit from Jesus.** It is our mission to see that their **families have the opportunity to be touched by God's love.** I believe we have a **mission to all the little kids of this community,** and to their **families** so that they might **find love, hope, healing and joy in Jesus.**

As I watched the concert, I noted how **all of the kids seemed to be involved** in some way. Some of the special needs kids couldn't sing, but they could clap or make the hand gestures. Some could only just sway with the music, **but they were somehow a part of what was being shared**. **Jesus' Church/Family** is a lot like that too. **Everyone is wanted and needed**... Everyone has a **part to play**... Everyone has **something to contribute**...

What a tough battle these little elementary school kids have ahead of them. Their families have hard work to do. **All families** have hard work to do...

Two weeks ago **Pastor Bob** and I helped to bless a new home for a young family. The dad offered a heartfelt and moving prayer for our meal. We had almost finished going room to room doing the blessing when the dad's emergency fire pager went off. Out the door he raced to a fire scene where a different family lost house, garage and vehicles.

A few days later one of our families said goodbye-for-now to little Noelle who died only five months after conception. Big brother Justin read this piece at her funeral. **"A wife who loses a husband is called a widow. A husband who loses a wife is called a widower. A child who loses a parent is called an orphan. There is no word for a parent who loses a child. That's how awful the loss is."** The God we welcome at Christmas knows quite a bit about children... God will never let them go or lose them...

It was two days after tiny Noelle's funeral that I was privileged to attend the Christmas Program at Rippleside. Later that day I met with another one of our families and the social worker who is trying to help them to do the work necessary to make a fresh start in life, to strengthen their beloved family.

The next day I made a baptism visit and learned the story of a young family that is looking for a good faith home in which to raise their precious little ones. They **know that we live in a tough world**. They **want God to live in that world with them**.

That same day I visited with the family who just **lost Grandpa**, who just lost Dad. The next day I visited with a family that was anticipating a **major surgery**. The next day I participated in **Grandpa's funeral**.

On Saturday I met with two other families who have traveled from distant places, home to Aitkin, to give their children back to God through the adoption that is Holy Baptism.

Last Sunday was our **Sunday School Christmas program**. Our little kids were able to sing lots more about Jesus in that program. Tuesday was the **4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Grade Choir and Band Concert**. Thursday was the **High School Choir Concert**. This weekend we are baptizing four little ones into Jesus' family...

**“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...”** (Matt. 1:18-19)

**Joseph** was just trying to do the **right thing by God**. He was a “**righteous man**,” meaning that he **tried to do God’s will in his life and world**. His world now had a **pregnant fiancé** and Joseph wasn’t the father. The right thing to do was to “**divorce**” her, break off the relationship. The law would have called for Mary to be **stoned to death** for her offense. Joseph wanted to do the right thing in the eyes of God and of his fellow Jews.

But, Joseph also wanted to do the **right thing by Mary**. He couldn’t bear to see her stoned to death so he decided to divorce her quietly, out of the public eye. **But, Joseph just didn’t understand**. God was at work here and was about to turn the world around, turning the world on its ear. God was coming into this world through a family, through a teenage girl who had never before carried a child in her womb. And God wanted Joseph’s help.

God has **bigger, richer and deeper plans for this world and our lives** than we could ever imagine on our own. Don’t divorce her Joseph. Marry her. Help her to raise God’s Son. “Name him **Jesus**.” Jesus means “**he will save his people from their sins**.” Jesus got another name too - “**Emmanuel**,” which means “**God is with us**.”

In other words, God said, “**Joseph, help me to bring Jesus into your family and world**.” Our world? We talked in 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Confirmation last week. I asked the kids what sorts of trouble they see around them at Aitkin High School, or in their friends’ lives that they can somehow make a

difference in. They went on to give accounts of everything from **attempted suicides to bullying**, from **eating disorders to drug use**, from **cutting wrists to sports concussions**, from **runaways to faith...** This, my friends, is the kind of world; these are the kinds of families that God loved enough to become a **baby in a manger** for, to become a **God hanging on a cross** for, **to live in the hearts of...**

We heard what Joseph faced. We have heard what our kids face. What do our husbands, our fathers face today? Are they also, like Joseph, trying to do the **right thing by God**? Are they also trying to do the **right thing by their spouses**? By their **kids**? Are you praying for any of these young men who are husbands or fathers right now? Are you praying for the parents? Are you **thinking of any particular young family or person** right now? God knows all about hanging out with young families... We call him **Jesus**, **Emmanuel**, **God with us**.

We are baptizing four little ones this weekend. Who will help the parents to keep their baptismal promises? Who will help them to make sure that their children come to know and believe in their hearts that **God loves them even more than mom and dad do**? Who will make sure that these little ones will be able to see in their parents' lives that **Jesus is their most trustworthy God and Friend**?

How do they put food on the table, keep a roof overhead, pay for all of the kids' activities, then have any time left to just **rest in the arms of God**? **You see, that's it**. Once Jesus is born into our world, into our own lives, **God carries us**. The Baby who saves us all, who does the right thing for us, who walks with us all – that Baby, that Jesus also **helps us to do the right thing** with **God**, with **spouse**, with **family**, with **work** and with **world**.

**I wonder why God chose to come into our world through a young family** – a mom, a dad and a baby? I'm not exactly sure why God did that two thousand years ago. But, I do know that **God still does that yet today**. **Jesus** – He saves God's people. **Emmanuel** – God is with us. **Good news for families**. Good news for all of us. Jesus is the One who makes me **hopeful**. Jesus is the **One who I am trusting to care for me**, for **you** and for the **young families** that he enters our world through. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas. Amen.