

ANGELIC MESSAGES FOR OUR TIME
“RECONSIDER”
MATTHEW 1:18-25

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Have you seen the cartoon featuring a gentleman and his cat? The man is holding his pet feline over a kitty litter box shouting firmly, “Never, never, never, ever think outside the box.”

What’s good for cats may not be so good for people. The hope of the world lies with creative dreamers who are willing to think outside the box. At least that seems to be the case surrounding the birth of Jesus. While people complained that things never change and nothing new ever happens around Nazareth, the angel of the Lord is busy planting impossible dreams in a perplexed town carpenter by the name of Joseph, giving him dreams that could only dance in his imagination.

There is a statement in the heart of Matthew’s brief narrative about Joseph that I want to call to our attention. It’s verse 20. *But after Joseph had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.* Boiled down to one word, the angelic message to Joseph was this: RECONSIDER. Sometimes you ought to move to reconsider, to rethink what you have assumed to be right. And that’s what I’d like for us to think about today. When is it time to reconsider?

WHEN IS IT TIME TO RECONSIDER FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

I know, no one gets a second chance to make a first impression. So there are consulting companies that will train you to get it right the first time. Of course, their point is well taken.

I ate lunch at a new restaurant this week. I wasn’t impressed with the food. So Sandy said what I was thinking. “I guess that’s the last meal we will have here.” New people visit our worship services every weekend of the year. Some find a good experience and return, eventually join and make this a church home. But others are not so favorably impressed. The sermon was dull, the music was not what they expected, no one bothered to speak to them and they spoke to no one. We will not likely get another chance to reach those people.

I was listening to a speaker describe the people of Brentwood not long ago. Among his conclusions were these: Brentwood people are quick to tell you what they think and very slow to change their minds. We don’t often get a second chance to make a first impression on people who live in this city.

But there is another statement I think is more important than that one. That statement is one I build my life on. It goes like this: “Things are not always what they sometimes seem to be.” Think about that. First impressions are not always

right, at least mine are not.

Certainly that is the situation facing Joseph in this scripture today. The culture was so radically different from ours. According to Sunday night soap opera's like Grey's Anatomy, lonely people in our day meet in neighborhood bars, sleep together hardly knowing each other's name, and then discover they work at the same hospital where the man's spouse is also employed. No wonder the American family is in trouble if that's the norm of our lives.

That's not the way it was in Joseph's day. Back then parents picked out their child's marriage partner, helped them get acquainted, then saw to it that they were legally engaged for a year; they were betrothed to one another. Finally they had a marriage ceremony after which they became man and wife and consummated the union.

Today, I ask you to walk a mile in Joseph's shoes. Mary started acting strange. Then she went away for three months to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When she returned to Nazareth she told Joseph that she was pregnant, though still a virgin, and the Holy Spirit was the father of her child.

Now let me ask you. If you were Joseph would you have been quick to believe this story? Would you stick around for a DNA test? Would you wait for a second opinion? Would you give Mary a second chance to change your first impression? *After Joseph had considered these things—an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said [Joseph, I need you to think outside the box.]* God's ways are not your ways. Sometimes we need to reconsider our first impressions about things. After he had considered this the angel spoke.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO RECONSIDER SOCIAL CUSTOMS?

The law was specific in Joseph's day. Any woman caught in adultery should be taken to the town square, publicly accused, then stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10).

Betrayal hurts. Sin is serious. I remember an abandoned wife saying to me one time, "I'd like to stand up in church and tell everybody that my husband is being unfaithful to me." I didn't encourage her to act on that instinct. I didn't think it would help anybody.

Not even righteous, upright Joseph could bring himself to do that. So he decides to divorce her quietly.

I always get a little nervous when people want to enforce every jot and tittle of the Bible, verse by verse, detail by detail without considering the situation in which it was spoken. I believe the Bible. But following specifics without considering the context alarms me. If we followed the Bible literally, you would be lining up and I'd be washing all your feet today, after all that's what Jesus said. And we would be greeting each other with a holy kiss, that's what Paul said we ought to be doing.

The angel asks Joseph to go even further. Don't divorce her quietly. Take her home to be your wife. Let the community count the months and gossip at the well. Take cold showers so that she will deliver the baby as a virgin. After Joseph had considered a loving thing—the angel asks for a radical thing. When is it right to reconsider what we assume to be the norm?

Once more as Christmas comes, we find ourselves engaged in a cultural battle over the proper way to celebrate this holiday. Those who want to be politically correct are encouraged to substitute Happy Holidays for Merry Christmas and Seasons Greetings for “Silent Night.” The U.S. Capitol no longer has a Christmas tree; it has a holiday tree. Schools don't take a Christmas break; they get a winter break. Ne'er a crèche can be found on public property.

Meanwhile, Brother Falwell and the Committee to Save Merry Christmas have announced that enough is enough. If you are a Christian, according to them, you should shop at Macy's and avoid Sears, and don't dare be caught inside Target because they are saying Seasons Greetings, not Merry Christmas. They have assembled about 1,500 lawyers to defend your personal right to say “Merry Christmas” wherever you want to say it.

Meanwhile, it seems to me that Jesus must be weeping. Just weeping. He weeps that some feel compelled to legislate Him out of existence. They've not been very successful at that in the past.

He weeps even more that people sing “Silent Night” without the slightest clue why that night should stun us to silence. He weeps because He has always had a hard time with Christmas. Christians stole a bunch of pagan habits to observe His birth. Even His most faithful followers seem most concerned with:

Shopping lists—Kitchen smells,
Children singing “Jingle Bells,”
Colored lights—falling snow,
Fireplaces with an amber glow,
Trees adorned with holly bough,
Parties, friends and mistletoe.

I doubt that lawyers will protect His birth any more than governors did so long ago. Right is seldom a result of public opinion. O, that we who sing “Christ the Savior is Born” could live like he was alive, as King of kings and Lord of lords. After Joseph had reconsidered, the angel spoke. When is it time to reconsider?

WHEN IS IT TIME TO RECONSIDER PERSONAL PROBLEMS?

I know, we have a saying in our lives that “God will never give me more than I can handle.” A lot of people live by that motto. Mother Theresa said, “I just wish God didn't trust me too much.”

Guilty people wonder why they don't do a better job of handling what's come to them. I need to tell you, I don't think that statement is true. It seems to me the opposite is in the Bible. God is always giving people in the Bible more than they can handle. They don't have a chance of doing the things God asks on their own. They can't begin to do that. How in the world is Joseph going to deal with this on his own? He can't. God gave Mary more than she could handle, no question about that. That's why you've got to depend on God in your life. If you can handle it by yourself, you don't need to be in church. Those of us who are in over our heads know we can't handle it at all. We have to find our way to work it out. God helps those who can't handle it by themselves.

Joseph still had to face the people of Nazareth—maybe that's why they went to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born. It's when we know that we cannot handle it alone that we ask God to handle it for us. Self-sufficient people are reluctant to do that. They need to do it anyway. Sometimes we need to look so deeply into a problem that we discover a possibility. When Goliath came against the Israelites, the soldiers thought 'He's so big we can never kill him.' David looked at the same giant and thought 'He's so big, I can't miss him.' With God's help we can turn problems into possibilities.

