

December 16, 2018 – the Third Sunday of Advent  
**Story**, A sermon by Nancy S Taylor  
Based on Matthew 1. 18-25

“Now, the birth of Jesus took place in this way ...” so writes Matthew. And what we have here, is the beginning, the tease, the dangling of a story yet to be unfurled.

“Now, the birth of Jesus took place in this way” ... and Matthew – pen poised above parchment – signals to us something is coming, some events or happenstances, some proceedings, something worthy of the telling, worthy of your time is in the offing.

Matthew writes: “Now, the birth of Jesus took place in this way ...” And we sit up, asking: *Which way? What happened? What makes this birth different from others?*

Matthew begins, “Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way...” and he goes on to write of angels and dreams, of the Holy Spirit and human flesh, of a prophecy and a naming; of a young woman, a girl really, who’s in a jam, and of man who, though mortified, yet manages to do by her the right thing.

“Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way...” and with that Matthew launches into a story we tell to this day, a story that circles the world, a story that has become the stuff of the greatest art and architecture. Where it not for what unfurls from this story, there would be no Chartres’s Cathedral, no Sistine Chapel with its frescos by Michelangelo, no “Annunciation” by Fra Angelica, no *Ave Maria* by Mozart, no Christmas carols, no Old South Church, no Chancel Choir, no Reverends June Cooper or John Edgerton.

“Now, the birth of Jesus took place in this way ...” writes Matthew. And what has happened since then (over the past 2000 years since the story came to pass) is that millions and millions of people have adopted this story as *their* story, and have adopted this family – the family of God and Jesus, of Mary and Joseph – as *their* family.

This church is here – you are here, (most of you anyway) – because you adopted this story, because you signed onto it, opted into it, jumped in with both feet, not to mention with your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Imagine this story – the story of Jesus, of Christianity; the story of a babe sent from heaven – as a gentle yoke or easy harness. You climb into it. You put it on. You buckle yourself in.

And, then, as with Christians throughout the world and across time, the story that began long, long ago, the story that began with the birth of Jesus, that self-same story continues to unfurl in and through you and your own life. Strapped in, buckled – you, fastened to this story, and this story fastened to you—you pull each other along.

This week twelve people are joining this church as members: one last Thursday at Jazz Worship; three at First Worship, another eight here are Festival Worship in a few minutes. Twelve: a good biblical number. Indeed, a sufficient quantity under the leadership of Jesus, to change the world for all time!

In joining this church each of these people steps into the yoke. Each takes up the harness of the story of Jesus and with us, helps to carry it forward.

Here's a question that was asked, pondered, last Sunday as some of us gathered with persons new to Old South to discuss membership. People wanted to know: Why join? Why not just attend? What's the point of joining? What do members get from membership that non-members don't get? What are the benefits of membership?

There are some practical answers to that question. Members can vote to sell and buy property, and to hire and fire ministers. Speaking for myself, I think the power to fire the ministers is a big deal!

It was a very big deal, indeed, five years ago in 2013 when the members of this church (the members only, mind you) voted to sell a piece of church property, an old book, a book printed on this soil in 1640, a book that became on the day of its sale, and remains today, the most expensive book in the world. It sold for \$14.2 million dollars. (I don't like to tell this story without reminding us of this: while we sold what is today, the most expensive book in the world, we sold the lesser of our two copies. We kept the better one.)

Today the money from that sale churns in our endowment, fueling ministries of mercy, justice and beauty. The members of this church did that. Non-members don't get to make that sort of consequential decision.

That's one answer to the question: why join? One kind of answer to the question: what makes a member different from a non-member?

There are other answers that are less fiduciary in nature, but no less consequential.

Think of marriage vows. Two people don't have to get married. They can live together without the vows. What do the vows add?

As with church membership, there are some technical, even fiduciary advantages: filing for taxes is one.

But the less technical, less fiduciary answer is this: through marriage vows, two persons make a public proclamation and confession (before God, and their families and in the eyes of the law) that they belong to each other and that, in some mystical and marvelous way, the two that they were, become one. Their two families sort of adopt each other. They reconsider how and where to do holidays, whose birthday's to acknowledge, whose babies to celebrate, whose funerals to attend.

Church membership is not unlike that. It is about opting in to a family, making public vows and adopting that family's traditions and celebrations. It's about proclaiming to the world that in some marvelous and mysterious way, you belong to this family of faith, and we belong to you. We begin to celebrate our holidays together. We attend funerals together.

But more than that, day by day by day, we willingly strap ourselves into a very particular, ever unfolding story: a story of angels and dreams, of the Holy Spirit and human flesh, of a prophecy and a naming; the story of a young woman, a girl really, who's in a jam, and of man who, though mortified, yet manages to do by her the right thing.

It is the story of a babe sent by God to earth from heaven; a babe, whose story is a bridge, a passage, tying earth to heaven and heaven to earth.

And honestly, to those of us who have opted in, whose new relations bear names like Ezekiel and Amos, Deborah and Miriam, Hannah and Priscilla, Moses, Lazarus, and Zechariah; whose dreams are visited by magi; whose world view is colored by parables; whose imaginations entertain angels; and who, despite all evidence to the contrary, hold fast to the prospect of peace on earth and good will among all people, to we who have opted in – who once upon a time got to sell the most expensive book in the world and transform it into Christian ministry – to us, the story that Matthew unfurls in this most holy season, is nothing less than the greatest story ever told.

It is into this story, into the unfurling of it that Catherine, Hilary, Jenna, Jamie, Katia, Mary & Jennifer, Stefanie, Sarah, Brad, Margaret and Connor now commit.

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**Matthew 1. 18-25.** 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." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.