



What Does It Mean To Be Holy?



A Sermon By

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An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-18-AAA.mp3>.

The Rev. Amanda A. Akes
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The Fourth Sunday of Advent
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Isaiah 7:10-16
Magnificat

Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

My wife Sarah is from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Like most other folks from East Tennessee, Sarah has a soft spot in her heart for Dolly Parton. The country queen was born and raised in Sevierville, just two and a half hours from Sarah's hometown. But it wasn't just their geographic proximity that made Sarah a Dolly fan, nor was it her love of country music; in fact, she's not a big country music person. The reason Sarah loves her is because of Dolly's philanthropic efforts to support the people of East Tennessee. Most recently, Dolly responded to the devastating wildfires that swept through East Tennessee by organizing a star-studded telethon and creating the My People Fund to provide financial support for those affected by the fires. Dolly has a big generous heart and I find that the more I learn about her, the more I'm becoming a Dolly fan too.

So, when a Dolly Parton Christmas special, called, Circle of Love, aired on NBC earlier this month, Sarah didn't have to twist my arm too much to coax me into watching it with her. Circle of Love tells the multifaceted story of Christmas 1955 in the Parton household. One piece of the story centers on 9-year-old Dolly, who wanted to play Mary in her school's Christmas pageant. She confided her deep desire to play the role to her friend Judy, who unabashedly recoiled in surprise, declaring that Mary was holy and that the firecracker Dolly didn't exactly fit the part. Spoiler alert - Dolly did get the role of Mary in the pageant and played the part superbly! But Judy's initial visceral response got me thinking about what it means to be holy. What is holiness?

Judy certainly associated the word holy with the word good, operating under the assumption that to be holy also meant that one led a pious, innocent, pure, or even perfect life. But that's where Judy got it wrong, and that's where we often get it wrong too. To be holy does not necessarily mean that one's life is angelically perfect. In fact, in some cases, holiness is anything but! Take for example Mary and Joseph, two of the key members of the holy family, whose stories we hear about in today's readings.

Matthew's gospel presents us with a holy family raked by turmoil. Their lives were anything but perfect. Think for a moment about the upset and distress that must have consumed both Joseph and Mary upon learning that Mary was pregnant.

An explanation about first-century Jewish marriage may help explain what I mean. Various texts render this passage differently. The text we hear today describes Mary and Joseph as "engaged." Other translations describe them as "pledged" to be married or "espoused" to one another. But no matter how you look at it, it's important to note that the bond between Mary and Joseph at this time was contractual, not merely social, as engagement is in our modern western culture. Espousal/betrothal/engagement, whatever you want to call it, constituted the legal contract and pledge of marriage. The wedding was the time when the bride and groom were accompanied by friends and feasting to celebrate the occasion of actually joining their households.

For all intents and purposes, then, Mary and Joseph were married but had not yet moved in with each other or consummated their union. Hence the turmoil created by discovering that Mary was pregnant. It could, as far as Joseph was concerned, mean only one thing: that his espoused wife had been unfaithful. So, Joseph, wanting out of what he believed was an unfaithful union, had two options -- public stoning or divorce. The text tells us that he opted for the latter course of action, not wishing, as Matthew describes, to expose Mary to public disgrace and, presumably, punishment. I invite you to imagine the great distress that fell upon Joseph (and Mary if he made his intentions known to her).

We're not used to this part of the story. Sure, we know it. We've heard it. But, it's not the part we typically focus our attention on. Usually, we're accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, and that's appropriate. But let's not forget the distress, the sense of betrayal, confusion, disappointment, fear, and a host of other emotions that the holy couple must have experienced.

Remembering this, we are reminded that Mary and Joseph aren't merely figures in our nativity scenes, rather, they were flesh and blood people. Their lives were complex and complicated. The more we can imagine them as people like us -- with ups and downs to their relationships, for instance -- the more we might imagine ourselves to be people like them -- that is, people who go through all kinds of things, some quite damaging, and yet whom God uses nevertheless to accomplish God's purposes.

Mary and Joseph's holiness isn't derived from the fact that they led perfect lives, but rather that they sought to do the right thing in the midst of their chaotic and tumultuous lives. They weren't perfect. They probably weren't angelically good. But they both were courageous and bold. I like to imagine them as kindred spirits to Dolly Parton -- firecrackers in their own right, with big, generous hearts, and imagination to spare, living in turbulent times. They audaciously broke with convention, Joseph by not putting Mary aside, and Mary by daring to conspire with God to do a new thing in the world. Their willingness to seek and do the right thing, allowed God to work in their lives in ways that they probably never thought possible. Theirs is a narrative of surprising and unexpected events and suggests that God is full of unexpected actions.

It is in the midst of their tumultuous lives that we glimpse true holiness. And we are invited to follow the holy family's example -- to be bold and courageous, to defy conventional norms, to do the right thing, to be open to God's movement in our own chaotic lives, and to be co-conspirators with the Holy Spirit in bringing about God's reign. We're not perfect, but neither were Mary and Joseph. We're not full of pure angelic goodness, but neither were they. We are however, capable of leading holy lives, lives like theirs, centered and focused in God. As we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, may we be reminded that we have holy work ahead of us and let us recommit ourselves to living holy lives, like Mary and Joseph. Amen.