Christmas 1983 was a momentous occasion in my life for two reasons:

1. It was my first Christmas as a pastor and my first Christmas with my first congregation, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Linden, New Jersey.
2. It was two weeks before Susan and I were married on January 7, 1984 (we are the answer to the question, “Who gets married in the winter?”)
3. It was a time of great excitement and anticipation mixed with a fair bit of anxiety. At St. Paul’s, I was making careful preparations for the first Christmas services that I would lead on my own, and I wanted to make certain that everything went smoothly as we celebrated the birth of our Saviour. At the same time, Susan and I were finalizing the plans for our wedding, hoping that everything went smoothly and that there were no unpleasant last-minute surprises. Thankfully, both the Christmas services and our marriage service went off without a hitch, and we have wonderful memories of that exciting time in our lives.

Over my years as a pastor, I have worked with hundreds of couples who often plan their weddings months and years in advance (I often get phone calls to schedule a marriage service before I have a calendar for that year). In the midst of all of their planning and preparation, each couple hopes to avoid any last-minute changes or surprises; this can range from something as trivial as certain flowers being unavailable or a last-minute alteration on the groom’s suit to more serious issues like the rings being lost or the caterer going bankrupt. No couple planning a wedding wants to be confronted with a sudden change of plans or last-minute circumstances that throw all their careful planning into chaos.

The Christmas Gospels introduce us to a young couple who are in the midst of preparations for their marriage. Mary and Joseph are a couple from Nazareth who are engaged, which according to the custom of the day was the first stage in marriage. The betrothal (kiddushin) was a marriage contract, typically arranged by the parents, that could only be broken by divorce; this was followed by the marriage feast, after which the groom took the bride to his home. This is the setting in which “the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place” in Matthew’s Gospel; it is that in-between time in which “Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together.” (1:18). As Susan and I were making preparations for our marriage service and our life together during that momentous Christmas, Mary and Joseph were making preparing for the celebration of their marriage feast with family and friends and for beginning their married life together in Nazareth, raising a family among the people of their hometown and fulfilling the dreams that shared for their life as husband and wife.

But all would not go as planned for this couple, for they would be confronted with a situation that would not only change their plans but threatened their future as husband and wife. As he is preparing the home that they will soon share, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. Matthew informs his readers that she is “with child from the Holy Spirit,” but all that Joseph can assume at first is that she is carrying another man’s child. Not only would this have been devastating news for Joseph, but it also confronted him with a dilemma as to how as “a righteous man” he would respond to this situation. One who is
“righteous” (δικαίος) is a person who lives according to the Torah, the Law of Moses; and the Law was very strict in its teaching in such circumstances:

- “If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” – Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

By Matthew’s time, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating. But Joseph decides not to expose Mary to such disgrace, planning instead to “dismiss her quietly,” to divorce his fiancé and get on with his life, which he believed had been permanently altered because of this devastating news of Mary’s unplanned pregnancy.

But at the same time as Joseph had arrived at this difficult decision, he received a visit from “an angel of the Lord [who] appeared to him in a dream.” (1:20). Angels, of course, play a critical role in the Christmas story. In Luke’s Gospel, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary as well as to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, announcing the birth of sons who would each play a role in the fulfillment of God’s promises:

- “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” – Luke 1:13-16.

- “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – Luke 1:30-33.

The angel who appears to Joseph in a dream makes a similar announcement; he addresses him as a “son of David” and encourages him to “not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (1:20). The announcement is followed by a command, after Mary gives birth to a son, “you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (1:21). In naming the child, Joseph will be accepting him as his own and adopting him into the Davidic line as an authentic “son of David.” The child is to be named “Jesus” (Yeshua, a form of the name “Joshua,” which means “God saves”). The name to be given to the child is significant for several reasons:

- “Jesus” was a common male name at the time; an ancestor of Joseph bore the name Jesus (Luke 3:29) and Paul mentions “Jesus who is called Justus” in Colossians 4:11. “Thus the Savior receives a common human name, a sign that unites him with the human beings of the world rather than separating him from them.” (M. Eugene Boring).

- The repeated refrain from the book of Joshua – “I [God] will be with you” (Joshua 1:9) – is an important motif in Matthew (1:23). Like his namesake in the Old Testament, Jesus will be the successor to Moses’ authority (“Then the LORD commissioned Joshua son of Nun, ‘Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them: I will be with you.”” – Deuteronomy 31:23).
The child born of Mary is given a name “as a designation of his function, which is to save his people from their sins.” (Arland J. Hultgren). Jesus will grant forgiveness of sins both in his earthly ministry (“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’” – 9:2) and in the authority he will entrust to his disciples to forgive sins after his death and resurrection (“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” – 16:19). It is at the name of Jesus that “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11).

Matthew identifies this event as the fulfillment of prophecy: “All this took place to fulfill what was 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.’” (1:22-23; Isaiah 7:14). This is the first of Matthew’s “formula quotations” in which the Evangelist declares that an event has taken place to fulfill what the prophet has spoken:

· “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” – 2:15; Hosea 11:1.

· “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’” – 2:17-18, Jeremiah 31:15.

· “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.’” – 8:17; Isaiah 53:4.

· “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, look you king is coming to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” – 21:4-5; Zechariah 9:9.

Matthew sees the coming of God’s Son into the world as the fulfillment of the promise given through Isaiah; “what Isaiah foresaw as a new era to come, Matthew saw as present. The birth of Jesus is the sign of God’s presence, ‘God with us.’” (Hultgren). The child who would be given the name “Emmanuel” will be the one “who represents the continuing divine presence among the people of God,” (Boring), a presence Jesus promises his followers in the concluding words of Matthew’s Gospel: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:20).

· “It was God-With-Us. Not the God-Up-There somewhere who answers our prayers by lifting us out of our lives, but the God who comes to us in the midst of them – however far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however much or little our lives reflect the Christmas cards we send. That is where God is born, just there, in any cradle we offer to him, on any pile of straw we will pat together with our hands.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

When Joseph wakes up, he is faced with a decision: does he obey the command of the angel, or does he go through with his original plan to divorce Mary. Joseph’s decision – like Mary’s in response to the announcement of the angel Gabriel – is one of obedience: “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.” (1:24-25). By naming the child, Joseph adopts him as his own son and as an heir to his ancestral line as a son of David. Joseph does even more than the angel commanded; he had no sexual relations with Mary until the child was born so that there would be no
doubt that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary” and is the child who “will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (Luke 1:35). Even though it meant a radical change in plans, the obedience of Mary and Joseph made them instruments through which the birth of the child who will “rule the world with truth and grace.”

“Miriam responded intelligently to the angel. She trusted God and let the Lord invade her deepest self in a physical way that has never been asked of anyone else, before or since. She is unique because she bore the Son of God in her body, and brought him to birth. Her ‘let it be’ is both willing, active assent and humble submission. In this she is a true daughter of the covenant. She agrees to walk the way through the wilderness, although her betrothal promises to Joseph will now be called into question, and her honour, and even her life itself, are under threat … Love encountered Miriam of Nazareth with might and wisdom when the angel, the messenger of the Lord, entered her home and answered her questions most meekly. Love made might and wisdom full meek within her womb.” – Jenny Robertson, Mary of Nazareth.

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” – John Lennon.

The birth of Jesus that we joyfully celebrate at Christmas was not good news at first to Joseph and Mary, because it meant a radical change in the plans they had made for their lives as husband and wife. It meant accepting that their first-born child would not be Joseph’s biological son, nor would be bear the name of his father as was the custom of the time. It meant that Joseph had to turn his back on the dictates of the Law when instead of divorcing Mary he took her as his wife and named the child Jesus, adopting him publicly as his own son and as a son of David, and heir of God’s covenant promises. It meant being forced to take an arduous and dangerous trip to Bethlehem in the late stages of Mary’s pregnancy because of the dictates of Caesar Augustus, and giving birth to their first-born son in a back-alley stable and laying him in a feeding trough. It meant being visited by shepherds and magi, and coming to terms with the fact that God had chosen this ordinary couple to accomplish God’s extraordinary Will for God’s people, that we might celebrate the good news that “a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6).

As I remember both my first Christmas as a pastor and the plans we were making for our wedding, I am thankful that there were few surprises that forced any significant change of plans in our lives. But there have been many moments in which our plans needed to be changed, when God’s call led us in new and unexpected directions that were not necessarily of our choosing. As God’s thoughts are not the same as our thoughts and God’s ways will not necessarily be the same as our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), so will the plans we make at times need to be altered as Mary and Joseph discovered when God chose them as the instruments through which God accomplished the good news that we celebrate at Christmas: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11). God’s plans are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, and we rejoice even though our plans may change because in this holy season “we hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!” (ELW Hymn 279).

Amen.