

Joseph the Righteous
Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

If only it were so. If only the scene were as picturesque as the one we see on our Christmas cards. We have heard the Christmas story so often, we quickly distill it to its kernel--the baby in the manger, surrounded by a caring, tranquil mother, and animals who, in the cartoon versions of the story, talk to each other about a beautiful baby born on a cold and slightly strange night.

This morning we're not concerned with the scenery or the props at the manger scene. Matthew starts with people, and the people are more like those from a soap opera than they are from a Christmas card or carol. They are people like you and me, sinful, short-sighted, and in desperate need of a Savior.

Matthew wants us to know that he is going to give it to us straight--no sugar coating or camouflaging. Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. Their parents may have had a hand in a regular marriage contract, which could have been made several years ago. Marriages were arranged and contracted for the benefit of families. They

were often arranged so that each pending marriage would be consummated at a time when the couple would be at peak child-bearing productivity. While our modern age spends much time, effort, and money in preventing the birth of children, children were treasured and desired, and often at the heart and core of a society's customs dealing with marriage. The wedding of Mary and Joseph had been planned so that there would be children.

But this is an "Uh oh." It had happened to others before. This time it happened close to home. A young woman, spoken for, contracted for, but not yet married, becomes pregnant. Joseph knows very well he was not responsible. If he had been responsible, he would have had to face her family and his, as well as the leaders of the synagogue and government. The problem was, he had kept his part of the bargain, and had resisted the urge to have sexual relations because it was God's expectation and command.

The true explanation for the pregnancy was no easier for Joseph to understand than it is for us. Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. That fact Mary might have accepted. The problem was, that God was not going to grant her an extraordinary birth in the same way that she experienced an extraordinary conception. She would have to carry the child to full term. She would be subject to the same cramps, circulation problems, and hormonal changes that most other expectant mothers know. There would be no shortcut through this pregnancy, and no painless birth. Even in his unborn state, Jesus would be true man, and know the security of the womb and the treachery of the birth canal.

We can hardly imagine Joseph losing control and throwing furniture across the room, or putting his hand through the wall, or kicking the garbage can across the alley when he learned of Mary's condition. But we can hardly imagine Joseph just sitting by, waxing philosophical, while trying to recall a piece of good news he had heard that day to balance off the bomb which had been handed to him -- that Mary was with child. Maybe he cooled off best by taking a long walk or bouncing things off his best friend or carpenter colleague. We don't know how long it took for him to list his alternatives of action. But there were, to his thinking, just two basic choices:

1) Cancel the contract—divorce Mary quietly and suffer the snickers and jokes of the jocks who would never let him forget that someone else had played house with Mary before she set up house with him. OR.....

2) Cancel the contract—divorce Mary, but do it up right. Expose her as a tramp and a godless good-for-nothing who deserved to have her baby at the home for wayward girls and street people. And while there would still be some jeers and a few raised eyebrows, at least Joseph would be vindicated, and Mary would be put in her place. Others who would consider tying the knot with her would know what they were getting used goods, complete with poor judgment and disregard of decency.

It was divorce--one way or the other. The only question was HOW. Loud and dirty, or quick and quiet. Joseph was a righteous man, and he had his options.

Today, when a marriage ends in divorce, the common knowledge is that it is rare when one partner is entirely innocent of blame while the other is 100% at fault. It might be rare, but Joseph the righteous is the one who did no wrong, clearly sinned against rather than sinning.

The miracle of Jesus' conception is then followed by the miracle of the angel's message to Joseph. This unnamed angel was able to accomplish what no person could have done. In just two sentences he convinces Joseph to do the unthinkable -- go through with the marriage, and pretend like everything is normal and fine.

For taking on this hero's role, Joseph would also miss out on the unique parental privilege of naming his child. The name was not negotiable. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Those were very special words. A sentence like that had once been spoken to Adam and Eve in the Garden. The promise of the Savior had been passed from father to son, mother to daughter, from generation to generation, through the long line of the people of God—through Noah, through Abraham, through the sons of Jacob, through the un-lost tribes -- all the way to the people of David's town. Joseph had heard the words before, but never from an angel. They sounded more powerful and more certain than he had ever heard them before.

We don't know if he woke up and made a pot of strong coffee in an attempt to clear his head. Maybe he had a note pad on his bed table like my wife Ruth does to write down in the dark whatever seems to be noteworthy in the middle of the night. Whatever he did, he didn't forget the message. And he assumed the role of God's servant -- and Mary's-- by doing what God had commanded through the angel.

Just how important is the angel in this story? While the angel told Joseph something awfully important, I believe the angel tells us something, too on this Sunday after Christmas. He tells me that Joseph was not a helpless pawn in the plan of God, pre-programmed before birth to blindly do whatever God had in store.

Joseph could have shaken off the dream as nonsense. He could have heard the words clearly and gone ahead with one of his divorce options anyway. God's sending the angel tells me that I am not a helpless pawn, moved around by God despite my personal preferences. God could have arranged Joseph's brain cells in a new way so that he would have been mechanically programmed to do exactly what God wanted. But God didn't. God inserted the angel into Joseph's dream and made him believable, and gave Joseph the option to respond to the dream on the level of action, or just excuse the vision as a logical explanation for eating pizza too close to bedtime.

That messenger and the message -- it couldn't have been God -- or could it?

He does the same with us. He could program us all to visit the sick or the lonely. He could arrange for an electronic funds transfer from our checking account into a relief organization every time there is a catastrophe. He could stop the world from spinning once a week until everyone would worship him, He doesn't. He commands, but then he persuades and urges, and sends his messages and his messengers to do his bidding. He can send his communication to you through your spouse, children, neighbor, co-worker, or friend -- but he wouldn't, would he? I think He could, and he has, and he does. He does all these things because he is a God of extraordinary patience who is ready to work through human beings to accomplish his purposes.

He uses the players on the human stage because of all the places in the universe God could have become involved with, he chose to be involved here. He did some of his most intricate creating here. And when the crown of his creation, human beings, sinned and rebelled, the God who defies explanations determined to send his son among men, to save them from their sins. He is Immanuel -- God with us. Right here. And he is with us by choice, and He is a God who gives choices to his creatures.

Yes, Joseph was a just man, righteous man. But Joseph was also a normal man – a sinner, in need of a savior – as much as the next man.

In rather dead-pan fashion, Matthew reports: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son." It means that Joseph and Mary had a normal relationship as husband and wife after the arrival of their firstborn. It means that as fully human, normal human beings, they failed to love God, each other, and their neighbors as much as they could. It means they sinned daily in thought, word, and deed. They lived a disappointingly normal life in the same household with the son of God, who was "God with them -- both Mary AND Joseph -- from the first two o'clock feeding, on.

Because of what we already know, we do not shake in our boots at the thought of God with us. In fact, God with us warms our hearts and makes us tingle as we consider the prospect of living lives as redeemed people throughout 2017, as God wills.

The Bible says, that Joseph gave him the name "Jesus." No wonder. He saves his people – he saves Old Testament believers – he saves his next door neighbors, and even his very own parents – he comes to save them all from their sins.

He chooses to do this, our God of choices, and he chooses to send a savior for Joseph, for Mary his mother, and for everyone here, and for every person God puts into your life. Amen?

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