

“When the angel said, ‘I’ve got news for you, Joseph’”

Matthew 1:18-25 NIV

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. (19) Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

“(20) But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (21) She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’

“(22) All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: (23) ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ --which means, “God with us.”’

“(24) When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (25) But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

We connect Christmas with joyful, merry things like:

- festively decorated trees;
- manger scenes;
- angels singing **“Peace on earth;”**
 - shepherds quietly watching flocks on a starry night;
 - caroling;
 - going to grandmother’s house;
- savoring cookies and gingerbread;
- Giving and receiving carefully wrapped presents;
 - Kids not so carefully unwrapping those gifts.

We cherish this season’s images.



Another part of this story needs telling.

One not often told.

Have you heard Joseph’s moral dilemma?

We all grapple with painful, gut wrenching decisions.

Times when from our perspective, it’s hard to make the right choices.

You’re possibly dealing with someone acting in a manner you feel isn’t deserving—someone you have a hard time loving.

You struggle to do the right thing.

A son, a daughter, a long-time friend, a neighbor, a coworker, an in-law or spouse causes you fits.

That person does not act loveably.

You’re ready to give up—call it quits.

A similar situation is part of the Christmas story, but hardly anyone mentions it.

- Instead we see nativity scenes depicting loving, doting saintly parents tending the Christ-child.

- A star of peace beams overhead.

- Admiring shepherds and wise men worship the child and congratulate the parents.

If you could “run the tape back” six months before Jesus’ birth, the scene wouldn’t seem so heavenly.

You’d witness strong tension in the so-called “holy family.

Maybe some bickering.

The kind of talk heard in ordinary households

Manger scenes and nativity pictures impart unrealistic images.

Mary was likely of junior high age—possibly 13 or 14.

Joseph, probably a little older.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed.

For Jewish couples, that meant engaged, but with a stronger commitment than modern engagements intimate.

“When the minister of Bay Shore Community Church introduced his midweek study on marriage, he asked the younger Sunday school kids to answer a series of questions about the great institution.



“Q: ‘What is the proper age to marry?’ A: ‘Eighty-four. Because at that age you don't have to work anymore, and you can spend all your time loving each other.’

Q: ‘When is it okay to kiss someone?’
A: ‘Never kiss in front of other people. It's a big embarrassing thing if anyone sees you. But if nobody sees you, I might be willing to try it with a handsome boy, but just for a few hours.’

Q: ‘Is it better to be single or married?’ A: ‘It's better for girls to be single, but not for boys. Boys need somebody to clean up after them.’

Q: ‘How does love happen between two people?’

A: ‘I think you're supposed to be shot with an arrow or something, but the rest isn't supposed to be so painful.’

Q: ‘What is falling in love like?’

A: ‘Like an avalanche where you have to run for your life.’

Q: ‘Why do lovers hold hands?’

A: ‘They want to make sure their rings don't fall off, because they paid good money for them.’

Q: ‘How does a person learn to kiss?’

A: ‘You learn right on the spot, when the “gooshy” feelings get the best of you.’

Q: ‘How do you make love endure?’

‘Don't forget your wife's name—that will mess up the love.’

‘Be a good kisser. It might make your wife forget that you never take the trash out.’¹

In Bible times, parents often arranged the marriages.

¹ THE WORLD'S GREATEST COLLECTION of CHURCH JOKES, p - 237

When the bride-to-be was about twelve, the couple made a commitment and then they’d get married a year later.

In the interim, they didn’t see each other much.

Times have changed, haven’t they?

The bride-to-be was expected to be a virgin.

They held husbands-to-be to the same standard.

People caught in the act of adultery were put to death—both the man and the woman.

The year’s engagement or betrothal provided ample time to demonstrate that any children born of the bride would belong to the husband.

The limited contact during the year of betrothal gave time to make sure.

In the case of Joseph and Mary, their year of betrothal hadn’t ended.

A problem occurred, but not in Houston. Somewhere in Israel, Mary became pregnant. Recall that the angel Gabriel forewarned Mary that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Remember her shock?

“How can this be, because I haven’t slept with a man?”

Mary knew her innocence.

The Lord knew it.

You and I believe it.

Think, though, of Joseph’s perspective.

As soon as the angel told Mary what would happen to her, she left to visit her cousin Elizabeth who lived 60 or 70 miles away.

She stayed three months, and then returned to Nazareth.

Our text describes the situation:

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”

How did Joseph find out?

Did Mary’s best friend or his neighbor tell him?

Could Joseph tell by her appearance?

The Bible tells us only of Joseph’s dilemma.

Put yourself in Joseph’s sandals, men.

Your fiancée, whom you are to soon marry, leaves to visit her cousin for three months.

She returns pregnant and tells you the Holy Spirit caused her pregnancy.

Would you buy that story?

Even if you did, would your peers believe it?

A good guy found himself in a tough spot.

Joseph loved Mary and wanted to do right, so he tried to keep her from public disgrace and maybe death.

He hoped to arrange a quiet, private divorce.

Engagements required a legal action.

“(19) Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

What must have gone through Joseph’s mind?

- His fiancée disappointed him.
 - He lost her love.
- He was humiliated and embarrassed.

- His friends would ridicule him as a cuckold.
- Some would likely say: **“I told you so!”**

Recall our theme today?

We spoke of the need to do right when circumstances seem not to warrant it.

We lose patience and confidence in our loved ones when it appears they’ve let us down.

We’re tempted to give up on them.

That was likely Joseph’s situation.

We get to the point at times don’t we?

Without angelic intervention, Joseph would never have believed Mary:

“An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”

“Well if an angel appeared to me in a dream, I’d know what to do. I could do the right thing,” we claim.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is greater than the angels: **“So he (Jesus) became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father’?”²**

A mere angel instructed Joseph.

Ours orders come from the Son of God in Scripture.

What Jesus tells us is infinitely more important than what any angel might say.

I don’t understand the fascination people have with angels.

We should listen to what our Creator’s Son tells us in the Bible.

He instructs us to keep forgiving and to continue loving.

“Love never gives up.”

Joseph didn’t give up on his loved one.

Though circumstances don’t always warrant it, we do right.



I think of how my life has been changed because people didn’t give up on me.

I read the true story of a man whose wife was unfaithful to him. A little girl was born. He didn’t know if the little girl was his or his wife’s lover. He faced a terrible decision. How would he treat that little girl?

Here’s what he decided. That little girl needed a father. He knew the lover would never love her and care for her. Only he could do that, so he accepted and loved the little girl as if there were no doubt that she was his own.



He also continued to treat his wife lovingly and respectfully.

Loving those who don’t deserve love is exactly what God did for us in Christ:

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”³

² Hebrews 1:4, 5 NIV

³ Romans 5:6 NIV

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Those saved from their sins by the child that Joseph took and reared as his own include you and me.

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Nazareth aerial view.



Bethlehem