

December 18, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Jesus is Immanuel

It seems to me that Joseph is the forgotten character in the Christmas story. Mary is properly hailed as the Mother of our Lord and is at the center of every Nativity scene. Joseph is often left out of the picture, or is standing in the corner holding a lantern so everyone can get a better look at Mary and Jesus. I have never seen Joseph on a postage stamp, nor do I ever recall seeing a picture of Joseph holding baby Jesus.

As you know, Joseph was a carpenter. He was not rich and famous, but he was happy. He was looking forward to bringing Mary home as his wife. Jewish wedding customs were different than ours. In our culture, the bride and groom speak their vows, sign the marriage certificate, celebrate with a reception and begin their life together all in one day. 2000 years ago, a Jewish couple spoke their vows and signed the marriage certificate and were considered legally married on one day. However, they did not have a wedding reception and did not begin living and sleeping together until the groom had his own house and could prove that he could support his wife. I like to imagine that Joseph was eagerly building his house and making plans for the wedding reception.

Joseph was shocked when Mary suddenly decided to visit her relative, Elisabeth, in Judea for 3 months. When she returned to Nazareth, Joseph eagerly raced to greet her. As she turned toward him, Joseph instantly noticed that her face was a little puffy. Then he noticed the little baby bump. Mary stammered, "Joseph, it's not what you think." "You're right," he barked, "This is not what I thought," as he turned and stomped away. When he got back to his nearly-built house, he started pounding in nails especially hard until he collapsed on the ground and sobbed. All of his plans and dreams were gone.

Maybe you've felt the way Joseph felt at that moment; betrayed by someone you loved, broken-hearted, crushed. Maybe you have felt deceived, cheated, burned, hurt. Maybe you've experienced some trauma that absolutely stopped your life and you did not know what to do next. Maybe all of your plans and dreams evaporated instantly. Maybe you've felt all alone and as if no one really understood what you were going through.

As Joseph tried to slow his mind down, he figured that he had three options. He could go ahead with the reception and invite Mary into the house, but...how could he live with her if she had already been unfaithful to him? Or, he could bring formal charges of adultery against her and – if he pressed the matter – could have even had her stoned to death, which was the Old Testament punishment for adultery. He did not like that idea either. Besides, it would kill an innocent child. The third option was to simply file divorce papers against her without stating any formal reason and just leave her to be on her own. It was still messy and people would gossip, but it was the lesser of three evils. Joseph was living his nightmare even before he put his head on his pillow. He must have tossed and turned a lot before he finally drifted off to sleep.

Matthew tells us that while Joseph was sleeping, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said (:20,21), "**Joseph son of David** [That was a reminder that Joseph had royal blood in his veins. He was a descendant of King David who ruled 1000 years earlier. No one really cared about that anymore, but God did. God said that the promised Savior would be born from King David's family tree.], **do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.**" By telling Joseph that he was going to name the baby boy, the angel was telling Joseph that he was going to be the child's step-father. He was going to raise him.

A few years ago, there was another fellow named Joseph (Sinawa) living in Florida. A child was born and the mother told Joseph that he was the father. He wanted to do the responsible thing so he signed the birth certificate and agreed to have his wages garnished. Every month for years, part of his paycheck was sent to the child's mother to help raise the child. After a few years, Joseph wanted to see the child. He asked the judge for permission and the judge required a DNA test. The DNA test proved that Joseph was NOT the father. Because of the way the law was worded and the timing of the issue, he was still required to pay for a child that is not his. That seemed a little unfair for Joseph in Florida.

It might seem a little unfair to Joseph of Nazareth as well. He was going to have to work hard to feed and clothe and raise a child that was not his. In reality, Joseph was getting a good deal. Certainly, when he first realized that Mary was pregnant, he felt crushed, broken-hearted, betrayed, deceived, cheated, burned, hurt. In reality, though, Mary had not been unfaithful. In reality, it was the baby growing in Mary who would be

crushed, broken-hearted, betrayed, deceived, cheated, burned, hurt. Jesus was left all alone as he hung on the cross and no one has ever or will ever understand what he went through. Even his own Father, who was one with Jesus from eternity, abandoned him. Jesus agreed to undergo such suffering and death so that his step-father Joseph and his mother Mary and you and I and the whole world would not have to worry about being eternally crushed and burned. Because of Jesus, God will not punish you for your sins. He can't because your sins are gone. They were washed away by Jesus' blood when he died on the cross. Your guilt is gone. Your sins are forgiven. The angel told Joseph that he was to name his step-son Jesus because (:21), **"he will save his people from their sins."** The name Jesus means, "the Lord saves."

Jesus' birth fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah (7:14), **"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means), "God with us."** The Hebrew syllables for "with us God" make the sounds "Immanuel." Jesus, who is God, is WITH US as he became human with flesh and blood. He lived WITH US on this earth. Really, God WITH US is a description of the entire plan of salvation. When Adam and Eve first sinned by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, we could have expected God to turn away from Adam & Eve. His dear people, the crown of his creation, the ones that he blessed with the perfect spouse and the perfect home, chose to believe the devil instead of God. They deliberately rebelled against God and became his enemy. God would have been completely justified in banishing them from his presence forever. Instead, God went looking for them. He knew where they were but he lovingly called them out, "Where are you?" He gently uncovered the sin they were trying to hide and he promised to send a Savior who would take away their sin. He promised to give them another paradise to replace the paradise they ruined. In love, God chose to be WITH his people.

The Christmas story is also about God taking action to be WITH US. Mary and Joseph did not fill out any application forms to be the earthly parents of Jesus. God chose them. God did not choose them because they were perfect. They were sinners like every other person born to sinful parents. Likewise, you and I did not volunteer to be part of Jesus' family either. We did not seek him out. He came to us. He made sure that we were in the right place and the right time so that we came into contact with the gospel – the good news of salvation. Through that message, he converted us. He gave us faith. He made us believers.

In verse 19, Joseph is described as **"faithful."** That is also be translated as "righteous" or "just." Joseph was not faithful, righteous or just on his own. Jesus, Immanuel, was WITH US so that he could be our substitute. He lived the perfect life that we could not. Through faith, simple trust in the heart, Jesus transferred his perfection to you. He declared Joseph, Mary, you and me to be perfect, pure, holy. Because of Jesus, you can look forward to living in the joy and happiness of heaven where you will be WITH GOD forever.

I smile to think that the next morning, Joseph went to Mary's house. She came to the door with red, puffy eyes from crying most of the night and barely sleeping. Perhaps he asked if she would take a walk. When they were far enough away so no one could hear them, he cleared his throat and said, "So, you probably won't believe this, but last night an angel talked to me. He explained everything. Mary, I'm sorry for how I stomped off in anger yesterday. Will you forgive me?" "Oh, Joseph. Of course, I believe you and, of course, I forgive you." Then they smiled and hugged.

A few days later, they had their wedding reception. It was not a big party at all. Mary's parents forced themselves to smile a few times but they did not fool anyone. The few friends and family members who were there were polite but stiff as they said things like, "We're happy for you," or, "We hope things go well for you." It was not the wedding reception or wedding night that Mary and Joseph planned on, but they couldn't have been happier. Not only were they together, but they had a secret that no one could have guessed. They knew that they were blessed beyond description. Not only did they have each other, but they were also with God in a way that no other couple in the world had ever been or would ever be. They knew that that their son was Jesus, the Lord who saves. The knew that their son was Immanuel, God with us. And this morning, you are also blessed. You know that God used Joseph and Mary so that you can join Mary and Joseph and all believers of all time in heaven. You know that Jesus is Immanuel and you are saved. Amen.