

MATTHEW'S CHRISTMAS STORY BEGINS WITH UNBELIEF BUT ENDS IN FAITH
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Advent, 2025
Matthew 1:18-25

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading read before, 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. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a Son, and you will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:**

²³ **“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,
and they will call His name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).**

²⁴ **When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a Son. And he called His name Jesus.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Last Sunday's Gospel¹ had to do with John the Baptist's impending execution, which caused him to doubt whether Jesus was really the Messiah about whom he himself had preached. Instead of being released from prison, John is asked to compare the things Jesus has been doing with what Isaiah said about the Messiah: the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.

Today's Gospel takes us a little closer to Christmas, but, like John, Joseph is unbelieving. It wasn't that Joseph didn't believe Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin bearing a child; he just didn't think it was happening to Mary, and really, no man in Joseph's position would have reacted any differently.

Christmas is a Mary-Jesus thing, not a Joseph-Jesus thing. Our carols are more about Mary and Jesus. Few speak of Joseph. Joseph's role is *secondary*, somewhere back among the figures of angels, the shepherds, and the Wise Men. Writing through the evangelist Matthew, the Holy Spirit puts Joseph in the centre of the stage. For Matthew, Christmas begins with Joseph's dilemma about what to do with a wife whom he thinks is carrying another man's child.

Culture shapes what we consider right and wrong. Joseph's situation of what to do with a woman to whom he was legally but still not physically joined is not a significant problem today, since many couples live together without being married, and they even have children. The scenario of a man marrying a woman who is carrying another man's child is not uncommon. But the world Joseph lived in was much different. Israelite men were *obliged* to have a son to secure the inheritance God had given the sons of Israel. Since Joseph was David's descendant, he knew he could be the line of descent of the Messiah. Someone else's child would not do. One way to discredit a person is to remind others that he is illegitimate. Jesus had to face this accusation. From the very beginning, the enemies of the Church have attempted to discredit Christianity by claiming that *Jesus may have been*

¹ Matthew 11:2-15

illegitimate. If this were really true, then Jesus would not be the Son of God, and the Christian religion would be a fraud.

Through repetition, what the Creed says about Jesus being “*conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary*” may have become so ordinary that we are unaware of the tension this caused between Mary and Joseph. If Mary had been unfaithful, Joseph would lose a wife, and Mary would lose not only a husband but also support for her Child and herself. John the Baptist began to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, but for Joseph, there were no doubts. He rejected Mary’s claim that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit. Things like this do not happen—and that’s right, things like this simply don’t happen—or don’t happen simply—but it happened once, and *God became a human being just like us*.

Joseph believed Mary’s word that she was pregnant, but not that she was pregnant with the Immanuel Child, the One promised by the prophet Isaiah. Legal separation and divorce are bitter experiences, but in Joseph’s mind, there was only one solution to his problem.

Old Testament law required divorce in cases of adultery and also allowed it without cause. Joseph chose the latter option. He would not tell anyone what he thought Mary had done. “**Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.**”

Joseph chose the kinder path. It’s one thing to be morally right, and another, and harder, thing to forgive. Indignation at others’ violations comes more easily to us than overlooking their faults. Joseph did not want to make a bad situation worse for her. Matthew introduces Joseph as not believing the word of salvation that Mary preached to him about her Child being the Son of God, but, on the other hand, Joseph is what every Christian should be in *not exposing the sins of others*. In his explanation of the commandment against bearing false witness, Luther says that not only should we avoid lying, but we should also put the best construction on even the bad things others do. In broadcasting the misdeeds of others, we bring condemnation upon ourselves.

Now Joseph had to get down to the brass tacks of how he was going to prevent Mary’s pregnancy from coming to light in a village of less than a hundred people. Today, a woman can travel out of town to give birth. Not so in the ancient world. Women rarely, if ever, travelled alone. Sooner rather than later, her predicament would become fodder for wagging tongues. This is probably the reality with which Joseph struggled as he lay in bed one night.

It is rare for anyone who goes to sleep at night to never be disrupted by the troubles of the day. We sleep, but we really don’t. Our minds are fully engaged in anxious dreams. When we awake, sometimes it’s as if we’d never slept at all. Caught in a sleepless sleep, “**an angel of the Lord appeared to (Joseph) 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.”**”

The Child Mary is carrying is not an ordinary child *but the God who redeems His people*. The God who had come in dreams to Abraham, Jacob, and the Old Testament Joseph, the one whom His brothers hated, was now coming to another Joseph in a dream. Mary’s husband would not be the biological father of the Messiah, but he would be His *legal father*. Joseph would pass his claim as the Son of David to Jesus. “**When Joseph woke from sleep**”—and probably much to Mary’s surprise, “**he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him,**” taking Mary into his home as his wife. Everything is done so that they can get together within the nine-month limit.

If, in our Christmas celebrations, Joseph is the minor figure, in the Christmas story, the first Christians heard he had the *major part*. That dream telling him to take Mary as his wife was not his last one. He received another dream to flee from the wrath of Herod to Egypt to save the Child’s life. He received still another dream, some years later, instructing him to return from Egypt to their home in Galilee. Then there is still another dream on the way back to Galilee, that they should avoid Judea,

where the treacherous son of the murderous Herod reigned. *Matthew's Christmas story begins with Joseph's refusal to believe his wife's report that she is carrying a Child conceived by the Holy Spirit, but ends with Joseph as the hero of faith and the guardian of the Child born to be the Saviour of the world.*

We can define life in several ways. One definition we can all resonate with is that life *is a series of dilemmas*. When we get through one dilemma, we face another. That also describes the Old Testament. God's people get out of one dilemma, and in a short time, they're in another. When God resolved Joseph's dilemma about what to do with an unfaithful wife, He resolved the predicament of all humankind. Mary's Child would save God's people from their sin by releasing them from death and Satan's power. All this Mary's Child could do because Jesus, "*God saves us,*" was also the Immanuel Child spoken of in Isaiah 7:14. That name means "*God is with us.*" God could save us because He became one with us. He became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

For all legal purposes throughout His life, Jesus was known as Joseph's son, and from Joseph, Jesus learned the trade of a carpenter. Yet after Matthew's Christmas narrative, Joseph plays no part in the Gospel. If there was any doubt about Jesus being the Son of David by blood and not just in law, Luke tells us that Mary was a descendant of David. So Jesus is David's Son by law through Joseph and by blood through Mary. On Palm Sunday, this all comes to a pinnacle when the crowds greet Jesus with "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" (Matt. 21:9).

Joseph's legacy would not only be preserved in the life of Jesus but also in the lives of his own sons. James, the eldest brother of Jesus, became the bishop of Jerusalem and the author of a New Testament book. Jude, another son of Joseph, also wrote a book of the Bible. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, who was related to whom by blood, lost its importance. Jesus said that His brothers, sisters, and mothers were those who did the will of His Father in believing that He was the Christ (Matt. 12:50). Together, Christ's brothers and sisters constitute the household of God.

The important point of Matthew's Christmas story is that God came to us as Mary's Child. But if we are looking for a secondary point, it might be Joseph's willingness not to make a public example of her. Joseph's forgiveness is raised to an even higher plane in Jesus, who forgives all of us so that as His Church we can become His Bride without spot or blemish. Like the Old Testament Joseph, Jesus forgives all His brothers with whom He has become one by His incarnation of the Virgin Mary. Matthew's Christmas story begins with unbelief but ends with faith, and maybe that's the way every Christmas should be. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.