

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Seeing Beyond What’s Obvious”

Are you still in the Christmas spirit? I thought I’d keep the spirit going by reading another Christmas passage this morning though today’s passage is not the passage we like to hear at Christmas. The passage we like to hear is from Luke’s Gospel, the one we read last Sunday that tells the story of the angel appearing to Elizabeth, then Mary, then the shepherds in the fields at night, where Jesus being born in a manger and we imagine the sheep and the cows and around him. The passage we just read is much less dramatic; Mary is pregnant, Joseph wants to call off the engagement, and angel appears to him in a dream and tells him not to do that, Joseph wakes up and does what the angel told him to do, and Jesus is born. No shepherds, no star, no wise men, no livestock, and the only angel that appears is in Joseph’s dream. You couldn’t have a very good children’s pageant with such a barebones story.

But this story offers us a great insight into our faith. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as **the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen**. Faith looks beyond what is obvious to something that is hidden and something that is good. The opposite of faith is not doubt but rather cynicism, which is the belief that there is only bad behind the obvious. The story we read today is a story of Joseph’s faith which triumphs over cynicism. Let’s start with what is obvious to Joseph; the woman to whom he is betrothed is pregnant, and *he aint the dad*. Even in our modern culture where family values hardly exist anymore, if your fiancé is pregnant and you aren’t the father it’s a problem to say the least. It’s clear to Joseph that Mary is not the woman that he thought she was, and being a righteous man he wants to end the engagement quietly so that Mary doesn’t end up being publicly humiliated.

And Joseph is struggling in his own mind. We don’t know if Mary has told him that she had an encounter with an angel who informed her that she would be bearing God’s own child, and if she *had* told him that this had happened he might have had a very difficult time believing her. He is struggling to have faith in the woman he wants to marry. We can’t fault Joseph for having doubts; it would be hard for anyone to believe that a young woman would be pregnant by way of the Holy Spirit, even though Joseph really *wants* to believe this. It is only after Joseph makes up

his mind to break off the engagement that God intervenes by way of an angel through a dream, and this encounter with an angel is what awakens Joseph's faith. God often uses our dreams to communicate truth to us and cause us to take action; every religion has stories about dreams with deep, symbolic meaning that guide our conscious behavior. Think of Pharaoh's dream that Old Testament Joseph interprets to mean that there is going to be a famine in Egypt unless they start storing up food. Joseph's dream is intended to nudge him into faith in his future wife and faith in God.

We should be thankful that Joseph was a man who sought God and was able to recognize that it was an angel of God who spoke to him in his dream. He could have woken up and said, "Wow, what a dream!" and then said, "Ah well; it was only a dream." He could have forgotten all about the dream and followed through with his original plan to end his relationship with Mary based upon the cold hard facts that were set before him. But Joseph took that leap of faith by believing in a dream and the angel in that dream, whatever form it might have taken. Joseph had *the assurance of things hoped for* - that Mary was the faithful, virtuous woman that he was in love with - and Joseph had *the conviction of things not seen* - that God was indeed doing something miraculous and magnificent through him and through Mary. Joseph had faith.

If you stop and think about it, the entire Christmas story is a story about people action on faith: The faith of the nation of Israel to believe in the prophets' words that God would send a messiah to his people; the faith of Elizabeth to believe that despite her age that she could conceive and bear a child; the faith of Mary to allow herself to be a vessel of God's chosen Son despite the scandalous circumstances surrounding her pregnancy; the faith of the Magi to follow a star into a foreign land believing that such a star marked the birth of a great king. We are invited to witness the same faith, faith that beyond what is obvious, beyond what we can observe with our eyes, God is doing something good. We are invited to experience the thrill of knowing that God wants us to be a part of his plans.

Finally we're invited to have faith in each other...which is hard for us. Even Joseph had a hard time believing that Mary had done no wrong when she was discovered to be with child. We need to build our faith in one another because God made us to be team players, to work together. Joseph and Mary were a team; they needed each other to raise baby Jesus. Teams work best when there is trust, and when teammates work to build up each other. Yes, there are people who will disappoint us, who will betray our trust and who don't care about doing what is right by God. But we should look at everyone in this world as part of a large team. We have to work to build trust between people in our world, which means we have to act in good faith toward others, even when others don't act in good faith toward us. I know that there are folks who are only interested in taking as much as they can and don't give at all. We shouldn't let those people walk all over us, but we should not forget that they are people who are loved by God just as we are loved by God. We should think of them as teammates who require a bit more patience, a bit more training. But we shouldn't give up on anyone. Remember that God will one day establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and we should not wish that anyone be left outside of that kingdom. Let us work to build faith between one another as we build our faith in God.