

## The Birth of Jesus the Messiah – Matt. 1:19-25

<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah<sup>[a]</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But 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. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;<sup>[b]</sup> and he named him Jesus.

## Isaiah 7:10-17

<sup>10</sup>Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah<sup>[c]</sup> said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman<sup>[e]</sup> is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.<sup>[f]</sup> <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup>The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

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**Matthew 1: 18-25; Isaiah 2:1-5**

**The Birth Announcement**

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This is a really awkward birth announcement. Matthew seems to need to clarify a lot of sensitive information, the kind that is sometimes difficult to include, the kind that brings to mind small town rumors and questions about the character of the couple. They were engaged, but hadn't moved in together yet. Mary was pregnant. Joseph wasn't the father. Joseph was a righteous man, and therefore was considering breaking off the engagement, which in those days had the added implications of divorce. This is the story of the birth of the Messiah, the Christ. And it could be the kind of story you and I have heard told in whispers, or have known to be the family secret through multiple generations until someone does the calculations between the marriage date and the arrival of the firstborn. Some families don't want that one aunt to go digging around too deeply in the genealogical records!

But maybe our values and expectations are changing. We may not be as aghast now at a couple who moves in together during or even before an engagement. We may not be as surprised by unmarried women's pregnancies or the partners who stand beside them. According to research conducted both by the United Nations and by the Pew Research Center's social trends reports, the number of babies born outside of marriage has been steadily on the rise. Currently, the United States rate of births to unmarried women is 40% of all births, and it's higher than that in several developed countries in Europe. That's up from only about 10% of all births in 1970, the year I was born. If you dig into Pew's research which also asks the question of people what

they think about this finding, we find multiple biases that occur when unmarried women have babies. They won't surprise you. Because many who find themselves in this situation are younger, poorer, or people of color, the presumption is on the part of white, educated, wealthier, more conservative folk that this trend might signal something bad happening in our society. And we've heard those stories of shame, haven't we? There may be shame either hidden or weaponized in our own families, or we have heard the condescension that's addressed toward others to keep the next generations behaving rightly.

Shame is a sub-context of this story too. How will the gospel writers deal with the rumors of Jesus' unusual family history in the outside world? Mark skips it altogether, beginning instead with Jesus' baptism. John goes back to the beginning of time and the Logos that existed with God from the primordial beginnings. Luke focuses his attention on Mary and her angel visitant. But perhaps Matthew, as the spiritual genealogist has the hardest job of all. To acknowledge Jesus as the true Messiah, after his shameful death, when the world remained pretty much unchanged, he has to connect the dots to what also appears to be a scandalous birth. We'll deal with the longer story of the genealogy later in Advent – December 22 to be exact, but in this particular text, it's Joseph who has an angel appear to him in a dream. The angel's words confirm words what he has heard before in his family and religious heritage as a descendent of David. He would have heard before what the prophet Isaiah said, "Look the virgin (a young woman) shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel." Yet this child will be part of HIS heritage, HIS family tree. Joseph – son of David – is not just a title, it's a reminder of who he is, where he comes from, what has been promised to his family line in the past, and what promises to be the answer for his family's future.

The angel, like most angels, comes to tell him what not to fear. This time, it's "Don't fear to take Mary as your wife." His plan had been, as Matthew tells us, "to dismiss her quietly." I've often thought this seemed like a convenient answer for him, but a really bad answer for Mary. And yet, Matthew reminds us that this was a righteous thought, a kind gesture. He was going to quiet the rumors, give her an out, allow her to avoid a very public disgrace by being obviously pregnant when every finger would be pointing at her as a woman who didn't abide by the cultural and religious expectation to be a virgin until having marital relations with her husband, or at the very least, her husband-to-be.

Joseph was entitled to a different life. No one would have blamed him had he divorced her on the spot. Indeed, his family line put him in at least a moderate position of prestige and power given how much time had gone by. A son of David, a descendant of Israel's blessed King. I've never gotten the sense that he was anything but a righteous man – though David's descendants were a colorful lot when you look at them all. And yet, in accepting this fate, the story would be told of him for centuries, millennia, that he was not Jesus' "real Dad." I'm sure no man appreciates that statement – ever. Step-parents seem to always get vilified, in Disney movies especially, but in culture in general. Those who accept a paternal role when the child is "not theirs" are, in some more judgmental circles, ridiculed as being less masculine. Internet insult culture abounds around this issue – currently. And no doubt, Joseph was on the receiving end of some teasing about Mary's unusual story. Human nature tells me that.

So, here's what I find amazing about Joseph. He is being asked by an angel to lean into a particularly vulnerable role, as a man, as a father, as a descendent of the King. Become the parent of Immanuel, God-with-us. This boy will be the one who saves us – so call him Jesus. Both parents of Jesus were well-chosen. It helps to look at the biblical stories this time of year

because the narratives around this couple become distorted. Mary is passed off as a passive recipient when she is anything but. Joseph is passed off as much older, and barely given a voice at all. His ability to receive what the angel has to say in a dream and follow through on it – knowing what he knows about his own time and place – is pretty amazing really.

In our own time and place where we place unrealistic expectations on fathers – to be emotionless, or to be workaholics, or to be always strong, never weak – we are still fighting against almost the very same shame narratives. Who hasn't heard the saying, "Be a man," or "Man-up." These prescribed gender roles are as constricting of who men are as the narratives about women and self-sacrificing motherhood that often get laid over Mary's role. Yes, Matthew does a good job of protecting and preserving Mary's virginity – for the sake of Joseph's reputation. But I like to think that Joseph accepted her, loved her, and adored his child far more than he was concerned about having his own story covered.

Brene Brown is currently a popular writer and speaker whose knowledge and insight has come from studying shame as a researcher. In her research, she found that both men and women carry shame, but because of gender roles that play a part in our culture even now, they tend to carry it differently. But she didn't always know that, it took a man critiquing her work to help her understand that she had heard clearly his wife and daughters, but didn't understand that they would expect him to always be strong and carry on no matter what. So in her own words, she says this, *"I've come to this belief that, if you show me a woman who can sit with a man in real vulnerability, in deep fear, and be with him in it, I will show you a woman who, A, has done her work and, B, does not derive her power from that man. And if you show me a man who can sit with a woman in deep struggle and vulnerability and not try to fix it, but just hear her and be*

*with her and hold space for it, I'll show you a guy who's done his work and a man who doesn't derive his power from controlling and fixing everything."*

I don't know if Joseph and Mary were that couple who got everything right. Probably not. What couple does? I was never so smart in my life as that window between leaving my own parents who didn't understand a thing, and before I became a parent and my world shifted upside down with responsibility for another human being. But for this holy family to be entrusted with becoming the caretakers of God in human skin, I suspect they had to develop some coping skills in ways that many of us might be able to more casually avoid.

Of course, we know more of the story than just this birth announcement and Matthew's description that "the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, took place in this way." But this year, I wanted to start here with the watching and waiting, of anticipating both how wonderful and how terrifying life is about to become for Joseph and Mary. It is the now, and not yet, that shows up in life, not just in a pregnancy, but in other times as well. It's being able to anticipate and worry, but also to imagine and wonder. I confess that Joseph is typically an afterthought in the story for me, and I wanted to bring him into my full attention this year as the nativity scene starts assembling in my mind. He is no minor character – just as fathers in our own lives are no minor characters – and when we consider our own fathers, they may have succumbed to that cultural pressure of having to be men of a certain mindset, or able to be vulnerably part of our lives as wise parents and loving Dads. Or just like I'd want us to consider about mothers – it's probably a bit of both – whether you knew him well or not so much. The shame and pain in families can go on for generations, but the good news is that we can be healers in the breach. That's why, I think, Jesus' family was especially chosen for him. He, as the living, breathing word of God would be the savior, the repairer of not only our sin, but of generations of sin. To be the giver of love, I can

only imagine that he had to be the receiver of love in his own home. Let it be so, not only for Jesus, but for us to be light and love in our own families – no matter how our own families are put together – no matter what the outside world tells us we have to be – let us embrace God's love for each other and listen for the angel's voice telling us not to be afraid to love. Amen.