

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

The Prophet Malachi wrote the final verse—the very last word from God in the OT (Mal 4:5-6).

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before [the day that the] LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents....

And then for the next 400 years ... God was silent.

When Alexander the Great conquered Jerusalem in 330 BC, God was silent.

In 150 BC, when the Maccabees fought unsuccessfully to free the Hebrew people from the Greeks, God was silent.

When Rome conquered the Greeks in 63 BC and took possession of Palestine, God was silent.

Four hundred years without a single word from God.

And then, in the midst of crushing poverty and oppression, in first-century Galilee, another messenger of God—the angel, Gabriel—appeared in a dream to a Jewish carpenter and spoke an even older word ... an ancient prophecy uttered by the prophet Isaiah (7:14) 800-years earlier:

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel ... God with us.

A Savior, announced to a man engaged to a woman who is now pregnant in questionable circumstances. An ancient promise, from a silent God, suddenly and unexpectedly revealed.

That is how Matthew begins his Gospel.

Mary unexpectedly, somehow pregnant.

Joseph unsure WHO got Mary pregnant, resolving to divorce her quietly...that is until he hears from the angel.

Remember that for Matthew, Joseph was important for a number of reasons. One of these reasons was that Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy back from Joseph through David all the way back to Abraham. Our scripture today begins just after those opening verses of begats naming Jesus' ancestors.

Of course that raises a question: why would anyone trace Jesus' ancestral line through Joseph when Joseph wasn't Jesus' biological father?

I have other questions. In a culture where lineage was always defined through males, four women are named—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba. At least three of these women were Gentiles and at least three had improper sexual relationships – that is, improper according to society's understanding.

Why this checkered ancestry?

I think that, in short, Matthew is telling us through this list of ancestors that Jesus' family is ordinary and flawed...like so much of the human race. We will explore his lineage further in a couple weeks when we work our way through that long list of begats.

At that time in Jewish history, Mary and Joseph's families had probably arranged the engagement and marriage of Mary and Joseph. Mary and Joseph were likely second or third cousins. Mary was very young, perhaps thirteen or fourteen-years-old.

The engagement was very serious; it was called a "betrothal." They were engaged before two witnesses. Joseph gave Mary a present; her father would pay a dowry. If Joseph had died, she would be called a widow. If Mary died, he would be called a widower. If the engagement broke up, it would be called a divorce.

During the time they were engaged, they were called husband-and-wife. While they were engaged, they were to have no sexual intercourse prior to marriage. The engagement lasted one year and then they were to be married. Note that if a woman became pregnant by another man during their betrothal, the woman could be stoned to death according to Jewish law, although that rarely happened.

During the year that Mary and Joseph were engaged, an angel visits Mary. The messenger tells Mary that she is to become pregnant.

She asks the angel, "How can I become pregnant? I am not married yet. I am only engaged to Joseph, and we cannot do that kind of stuff. How can I become pregnant?"

"The Holy Spirit will come over you, and you will conceive and give birth to a child," says the angel. Mary waited. She missed her first period...then her second. She started to have morning sickness, and it was now time to have that important – AND DELICATE - conversation with Joseph.

We have no Biblical record of that conversation, but I can imagine this would be difficult.

"Joseph, I have something to tell you. I don't understand it, and it is hard for me to tell you because there is no way I can comprehend what is going on." ...

"Go ahead, Mary. Tell me. I can handle it." ...

"Joseph, I don't know how to tell you." ...

"Tell me; we can handle anything." ...

"I am pregnant."

There is a long silence...a pregnant pause.
This is an awkward moment.

Joseph assumes she is pregnant by another man. He is humiliated. Mary has betrayed him. He knew the legal consequences. He knew the Old Testament law. She could die for this.

So he asks the obvious question, "Who? Who got you pregnant?"

"An angel – visited me and told me that this was going to happen. The Holy Spirit got me pregnant."

"Sure Mary. Sure."

The Bible tells us that he resolved to divorce her quietly.
Look carefully at the text; it clearly implies that Joseph did not believe her. Who would?

We read “Joseph was a just man.”
That means that Joseph was a good man, a kind man, an honorable man.
Some translations say he was RIGHTEOUS.

Joseph is a righteous man.
When we are told that Joseph is a righteous man, it means that he is one who does what is right in strict accordance with the teachings of the Jewish law. Joseph, in short, is precisely the kind of person who was regarded highly by those in the Jewish community to whom Matthew is writing.

Joseph is the sort of person I expect God to entrust with raising Jesus. But that choice also puts a twist on the story: Instead of rewarding this righteous man, God turns his life up-side-down and his righteousness on its head.

Joseph is placed in the awkward position of choosing between cooperating with the call of God or maintaining his reputation for righteousness. From our perspective – 2000 years later, to believe that Matthew says Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit may not seem all that important.

In Joseph’s day NO ONE would believe.
So what is Joseph to do?

Because Joseph is a righteous man, he decides to divorce his apparently-unfaithful wife. The law does not allow him to forgive-and-forget. But Joseph’s righteousness is more than simply following the law; he seems to care for and love Mary.
The next verse reads, “Joseph was unwilling to put her to shame.”

That tells us mountains about Joseph.
He didn’t want to hurt Mary.
He didn’t want to destroy her.
He is not punitive.
He is not vengeful.
Instead, Joseph shows her grace, and resolves to divorce her quietly.

Not tell *her* parents.
Not tell *his* parents.
Not tell the Jewish rabbi.
Not to tell the Jewish court so he could get his money back.

So the first story about the birth of Jesus is a story of compassion, a story of grace.
Jesus' story begins with a man who had been violated by a pregnant woman and, yet, he does not wish to punish her. He has been deeply hurt, yet he still cared for her and took care of her.
This is the gospel. This is the beginnings of the good news.

Then the angel came to Joseph in a dream.
God does not appear to him when he is wide awake and at prayer.
There is no burning bush.
There is no parting of the clouds on the mountaintop.
There is only a dream.
Can we trust dreams?

But the dream was enough for Joseph.
It answered his questions.
What should I do about Mary?
What does the law demand of a righteous Jew, such as myself?
What does my heart tell me about Mary's crazy story?
Joseph's dream answers his questions.

Isn't that often the way of God?
God's work often upsets the comfortable social expectations and conventions.
Who could imagine that God would come to earth through the life of a young, poor, virgin girl named Mary?
What a scandal!

Somehow, Joseph trusts this strange news.
He violates convention.
He remains faithful to Mary.
All because God acted unexpectedly.
The angel essentially tells Joseph in a dream,
 I know this is not what you expected, Joseph, but it is going to be OK. God is about to do something wonderful...despite the fact that according to Jewish custom and law you are in a socially unacceptable situation.

Somehow, Joseph trusts this strange news.
Perhaps the other clue for Joseph – other than an angelic messenger – was in the name.
He already has a name, says the angel.
His name shall be Jesus.
And, he will save people from their sins.

Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name – Joshua.
Translated: Jesus/Joshua means “God is my salvation”
His name will be Jesus.
And he will save people from their sins.
Thanks be to God. Amen.