

## Matthew 1: 18 - 25

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

"Advent: A Time to Trust"

Matthew 1: 18 - 25

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

La Habra UMC

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Are you done with Christmas shopping?  
So why do we give gifts, exchange gifts, or have secret santa, around Christmas?

Of course, it has a lot to do with the three wisemen who came to see Baby Jesus with their gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense.

And Saint Nicholas who distributed wealth to the poor  
and for a series of miracles and benevolent acts.

We know about a poor young boy, without a gift for baby Jesus,  
Played his drum for Jesus with approval from Jesus's mother, Mary.  
He played his best for him, and the song said, "He smiled at me".

And you know the story of poinsettia:  
According to Mexican lore, a young child, Pepita,  
did not have a gift for the baby Jesus at a Christmas Eve service.  
She was penniless, so all she could do was pick a bouquet of weeds to offer.  
The angels felt compassion for her plight.  
So, after Pepita set the flowers at the manger  
of the Nativity on Christmas Eve,  
the angels transformed the weeds into beautiful red flowers.

And it is God's gift of love we've received in Jesus Christ.  
Christmas, therefore, became the holiday of gifts.  
Gifts we give and gifts we receive..

We are moved by stories of unusual gifts.

Today, we are focusing on the two  
 who gave very special gifts to baby Jesus  
 even before the shepherds or the wisemen came?

We often forget, but it was actually Mary and Joseph  
 who gave Baby Jesus the very first gifts.  
 The gift of life.

Mary, with fear and trembling, obeyed and trusted God.  
 She gave her body, her soul, and actually put her life in danger  
 to be the mother of this savior child.

Joseph, obeyed and trusted God.  
 He gave Jesus his family name and his paternal protection.  
 Joseph gave his soul to this unknown baby  
 whom he certainly knew was not his own.  
 As the earthly father to Jesus, Joseph gave God's child  
 the identity as a descendant of David  
 and the means to survive in the first century middle east.

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The predominate tone of Matthew's account of the nativity is  
 one of embarrassment.  
 Poor Joseph! Poor Mary!  
 They were only legally engaged,  
 and Mary was found to be with child.  
 And we can see for sure  
 that this child was an unexpected intrusion  
 into their lives.

Mary, as an unwed mother,  
 had to go through the people's behind talks, gossips, and finger pointing  
 and death by stoning.  
 Major embarrassment.  
 Joseph, however, had a bigger problem  
 For the first century, middle eastern standard.

If Jesus came to the world as a baby in the modern time,  
     the whole story might be quite different.  
 Mary could have become a single mom  
     who had a child out of wedlock.  
 And I know several single mothers who were able to raise children successfully.

But it was a different time.  
 In the first century middle eastern society,  
     women had no way of surviving by herself.  
 They had no means to provide for their families.  
 So Joseph's decision was a very important one  
     for the sake of not only Mary but also the baby.  
 The survival of baby Jesus heavily depended on Joseph's decision.

In the book of Deuteronomy we read a part of the Law.  
 "If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married,  
     and a man meets her in the town and lies with her,  
         you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town  
         and stone them to death,  
     The young woman because she did not cry for help in the town  
     and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife.  
 So you shall purge the evil from your midst." (Deuteronomy 22: 23-24)

This was the law.  
     The obligation any good Jew needed to follow.  
 Matthew stresses that Joseph was a righteous man -  
     a moral law-abiding person.  
 Joseph was righteous, but not rigid.  
 The righteousness also has the character  
     that allowed him to act with mercy.

As one who was righteous,  
     Joseph's obedience to the law insisted  
         that he had nothing more to do with Mary.  
 Under the same law we've just read,  
     Mary was an adulteress, and their marriage could not occur.  
 Joseph could choose one of the two ways  
     to disintegrate their betrothal contract.

He could bring public charges of adultery against Mary  
 And let the law take its full course.  
 He knew and we know that would lead to death by stoning.  
 Or Joseph could simply take two witnesses with him  
     as he formally confronted Mary with charges of adultery.  
 In the presence of just those two witnesses,  
     Joseph could divorce his betrothed.  
 And he decided to take the gentler approach.

If he did that, what could happen to Mary?  
 As a woman, Mary had no means to support herself.  
     Even if her father let her stay at his house,  
     Jesus would not have any name, no identity, to take onto himself,  
     which meant even if he were born he had no existence.

Specially being a boy,  
     having no name, no lineage to follow,  
     means more serious problem in his future.

Then an angel came to Joseph in a dream.  
 The angel said, "Joseph, let God be in charge.  
     Marry the woman.  
     Assume the responsibility of fatherhood.  
     The child, Jesus, will be a sign that God is with you."

I wonder if Joseph totally understood what he was doing,  
     but he trusted.  
 He forsook all the social expectations,  
     and went against what we call, the normal thing to do.  
 He even went against the law,  
     but followed God's leading.

Yes, Joseph was a righteous man.  
 Being righteous means not just be concerned with  
     technicalities and issues of precise legality.  
 Being righteous also means being merciful.  
 Being righteous means knowing and trusting you are following God's leading,  
     and God is with you.

So Mary and Joseph became the first persons  
 who gave the gift of self to the Savior.  
 These two were the first miracle makers.  
 They became the instruments of God,  
 And partners with God, so God is with us.

As we celebrate his birth each year,  
 Just as God's very being was given at Christmas,  
 we are asked to do the same.  
 To give ourselves to the Christ child,  
 to give our heart to Jesus  
 So God can be with us.

When we obey and trust, and give ourselves to God,  
 God can use us to bring miracles to the world.

Joan of Arc, the patron saint of France, expresses this concept perfectly.  
The Lark is the play presenting the trial, condemnation, and execution of Joan

In Act 1, she is on trial for her life and she says to her inquisitor:

"I say that real miracles are not tricks performed  
 by gypsies in a village square.  
 True miracles are created by men (or people)  
 when they use the courage and intelligence that God gave them....  
 And man (or a person) is also strength and courage and splendor  
 in our most desperate minutes."

When we trust God and follow God's leading,  
 we can become mighty strong, and the splendidly useful tools.

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The following story will help us to find the focus:

In a steamy rice paddy in Vietnam in 1968,  
 an American military unit  
 was engaged in a bitter fire fight with the Viet Cong.

A young soldier, who was badly wounded,  
was lying in the field,  
exposed to enemy fire.

He cried out for help.

Amid deadly fire,  
a young medical corpsman crawled across the field  
and slowly dragged the wounded soldier back to a ditch and safety.

Just as they reached the edge of the ditch  
and the wounded soldier was pushed in to waiting hands,  
the medic was hit by a shot,  
and died on the spot.

When the wounded soldier was evacuated to the U. S. and recovered,  
he wanted to visit the family of the man  
who had saved his life.

He traveled to West Virginia  
and sought out the medic's young widow and two small children.

As he sat in her living room  
and watched the two children playing on the carpet,  
he resolved that for the rest of his life,  
he was going to see that  
this young woman and her children had whatever they needed.

When the time would come,  
there would be money for their education.

"After all," he reflected,  
"how can you express your thanks to one  
who gave his life that you might live?"

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That is the fundamental question of Christmas, isn't it?  
In the midst of all the givings going on,  
I ask this question.

"What Christmas gift can we give  
to the One who came to save us?"

Mary and Joseph gave themselves  
because they trusted in their callings  
and stood against all that were expected by the majority of people,  
standards, and even the laws of the time.

They trusted the unseen and often unknown God.

"What Christmas gift can we give  
to the One who came to save us?"

Amen.

### **Response to the Word**

We are moved by Joseph's example of trust, faith, humility, and obedience. Despite his confusion and the challenges he faced, Joseph trusted God's message and courageously accepted Mary and the role she and their family would play in God's plan. This passage reminded us of the importance of listening for God's guidance, even when it leads us in unexpected directions. It encourages to embrace faith over fear and to respond with compassion and integrity, just as Joseph did. In this season, may we find the courage to say "yes" to God's plans for our lives, trusting that His purpose is always greater than our understanding.