

Jesus the Savior
Matthew 1:18-25
John Breon

I once read a story about a boy named Joseph (that's appropriate for this sermon). He was one of those children who could completely disrupt a class in three seconds flat. No matter how well prepared the teacher, no matter how well planned their responses, Joseph could turn things upside down in a heartbeat. And on one particular day, Joseph was being especially challenging. They were trying to get ready for the Christmas play.

Joseph kept muttering, "Ain't coming to no Christmas play. I got better things to do! Wouldn't come if you gave me the best part! Hah!" They considered leaving him out altogether. In the end, the teacher asked him to work with her. They would sit up front and help folks remember when to come and go. If the angels stayed a bit too long, they would prompt them to return to their seats.

"It's a really important part, Joseph. In fact, they can't do the play without us, so I hope you're going to be here."

"Told you I ain't got time for no stupid play. My mama's takin' me to the Christmas parade, and I'll be partying while y'all are in here fooling around." Joseph's mother worked two jobs, and it wasn't likely that she would take him to the Christmas parade.

Even so, they didn't expect to see Joseph that Sunday afternoon. But when the teacher drove into the parking lot, 45 minutes early, there he was, all dressed up, sitting on the steps, waiting. One of the neighbors told her he'd been there for 30 minutes—just waiting. He greeted her with a smile and hug and was incredibly helpful. Joseph was willing to do whatever was asked of him and more. It made her wonder if this was the same child.

It was almost time for the play to start. Joseph was helping get the younger children ready. One of the older boys came into the room, took one look at Joseph and hollered, "Thought you weren't comin' to no stupid play. Thought you had better things to do!"

They figured this was the end of the angelic behavior and waited for the explosion. Joseph turned to look at the older boy, then turned back to

his work, declaring, "That was before I was in the story. See, now I'm in the story—they can't do it without me. Now I'm in the story—course I'm here." (*Alive Now*, Nov/Dec, '95, 33-35). God wants to include us in his story. As we hear the Christmas story again, let's take our place in God's salvation story.

Matthew begins, "This is how the birth of Jesus *Christ* came about" (v 18). This is now the third time Matthew has used the title or name "Christ." "Christ" is the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Messiah." These words mean "the Anointed One"—that is, one especially chosen and set apart by God. In the Old Testament, kings and priests were anointed as they took their office. Based on OT prophecies, the expectation had developed that God would fulfill the promises to David and Israel through a descendent of David's. This descendent, the Messiah, would deliver Israel and reign over them. And his reign would bring a time of restored glory and blessing to the nation.

God did intend to send the Messiah to deliver his people and to reign over them. But God's plan for Messiah's kingdom wasn't exactly what the people expected.

The circumstances of the Messiah's birth were surprising. Mary—a virgin—was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. This created an awkward situation for Mary and for Joseph, the man she was pledged to be married to.

There were three steps in a Jewish wedding: 1) the engagement which the parents usually arranged with the couple's consent; 2) the betrothal—this was a legally binding relationship lasting one year. The couple were pledged to each other and regarded as husband and wife. A divorce was required to break this relationship. However, the couple didn't yet live together. That came with 3) the marriage itself.

It was during the second stage, betrothal, that Mary became pregnant. One church was preparing for their Christmas pageant. They had rehearsed using the King James Version that says Mary was "great with child." But right before the performance someone decided to use a modern translation. So as Mary and Joseph made their way across the stage, the narrator read, "And Mary was pregnant." The boy playing Joseph stopped,

looked shocked and said, "Pregnant? What do you mean pregnant?" (Michael Lindvall, *The Good News from North Haven* 14).

Joseph was now faced with the perplexing question, "What am I going to do with this baby and its mother?" Husbands at that time were responsible for such decisions. Joseph knew he wasn't the father. He assumed that Mary had been with another man. In which case the Law called for her to be tried publicly and stoned (Deuteronomy 22:23-24)—though in Joseph's day that sentence was rarely carried out. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man who didn't want to shame or disgrace Mary publicly, which a divorce could entail. So when he decided to divorce Mary, he wanted to keep it as quiet as possible and involve as few people as possible. His answer to the problem was to protect his reputation, distance himself, and put Mary and the baby aside.

But God had a better idea. After Joseph had considered the awkward situation, he received an angelic answer in a dream. God's message to Joseph was, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." The angel explained that the Holy Spirit was the source of the baby in Mary's womb. Jesus is special, absolutely unique. His conception was miraculous—a creative miracle by the Spirit of God.

In Genesis 1, God's Spirit creates a new world. In Exodus, God's Spirit, God's wind, blows back the waters in Egypt to deliver Israel from slavery. God's Spirit calls prophets and apostles and martyrs to do dangerous acts of obedience. In the book of Acts, God's Spirit comes upon the disciples and creates a new community of obedience and mission. God's Spirit "begins something new when the world is exhausted, when our imagination fails and when our lives are shut down in despair." This is the Spirit who begins new creation in Jesus the Messiah and Savior. Matthew tells us that God's Spirit "has stirred and caused something utterly new in the world. God has caused this new baby who will change everything among us" (Walter Bruggemann, "A New World Birthed," [http://day1.org/622-a new world birthed](http://day1.org/622-a-new-world-birthed), accessed 12/13/16).

The angel said that Mary would have a son. Then he called Joseph to take responsibility for Mary and her child. Joseph was to become Jesus' legal father through adoption. God was entrusting his Son to Joseph.

Naming a child was the father's legal right. So Joseph's responsibility included giving the child a name.

And Joseph was to name the child *Jesus*, "because he will save his people from their sins."

Names were very important for describing persons' character and life. Jesus' mission is expressed in his name. The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua." It means "Yahweh is salvation." His very name tells us that God saves. Jesus is God's salvation in human history, saving his people from their sins. He came as a deliverer, not from Roman oppression, but from sins. Jesus saves from sin and guilt and shame. He saves from death and destruction. He saves from despair and hopelessness. He saves from poverty and sickness and hunger. When we talk about Jesus, we announce that he is the one who saves (Bruggemann).

I did a quick look through Matthew's Gospel at the words Savior, save, and salvation. Sometimes that family of words refers to deliverance from trouble, like when the disciples are in storms at sea and cry out, "Lord, save us!" (8:25; 14:30). That seems to be the kind of salvation the people around the cross had in mind when they taunted Jesus to "save yourself" (27:40, 42).

The words for save and salvation can also speak of physical healing. When a woman who suffered from chronic bleeding touched the hem of Jesus' robe, she was healed and Jesus said to her, "Your faith has saved you" (9:22). When a paralyzed man was brought to him, Jesus first said, "Your sins are forgiven," then he told the man, "Take up your mat and go home"—and the man was able to get up and walk (9:2, 6).

Twice Jesus says, "Those who stand firm to the end will be saved" (10:22; 24:13). So there's a sense of endurance and faithfulness involved.

After Jesus declares that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter God's kingdom, the disciples ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replies, "With human beings this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:25-26).

Jesus talks about how trying to save one's own life (or soul) means losing it, but losing life for Jesus means saving it. Holding on to what gives pleasure or satisfaction in this world doesn't give us real life. Avoiding the

danger that comes from identifying with Jesus doesn't protect us. Saying "no" to self and possibly even dying for the sake of Jesus means saving our lives in the sense that we experience God's kingdom and enjoy blessings that are really worth having ("Salvation." *IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*).

So Jesus the Savior brings forgiveness for sins and deliverance from sin. He not only forgives what we do, he also transforms who we are. The salvation he offers includes redeeming us and restoring life and wholeness. It sustains us through all the troubles and struggles of this life. It carries us through death into a new experience of God's presence and, someday, through resurrection into a new form of life in God's ultimate new creation.

All of this comes when we're in relationship with the God who is with us in Jesus Christ. The name or royal title Immanuel means "God with us." In Jesus, God is present making everything new. Jesus was always showing up where people were in need, and he saved them—"lepers, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the unclean, even the dead. His very presence makes new life possible, and the church consists in all the people who have been dazzled by the reality of God who has come to be with us in this season of need and joy, all through this miraculous baby"(Bruggemann).

God's plan needs human cooperation. God uses human stories to enact God's story of salvation. God entrusted his Son to Joseph's care and Joseph was a good choice. He obeyed God's call. When Joseph woke up, "he did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus" (*The Message*). Joseph became the legal father of Mary's child.

The story of salvation goes on. God invites us to be part of it, to make it our story, by recognizing God's presence in Jesus and letting him save us from our sins, from all that keeps us from living the life God wants for us, all that keeps us from being the people of God. God also entrusts to us the Good News. God's plan is for us, like Joseph, to do our part to ensure that the story goes on.

Douglas Ruffle was a missionary in Argentina for several years. While there, he served Peace Community Church in Rosaria. One Christmas week,

on a Saturday evening, Peace Community got permission from the local police to close off the street so they could put on a Christmas pageant for the neighborhood. They took chairs from the worship center and placed them in the street, facing the church building. The youth and children of the church—dressed as shepherds or wise men or the innkeeper and, of course, as Mary and Joseph—reenacted the events of Jesus' birth. The baby was a doll dressed in swaddling clothes. Late December is summer in the southern hemisphere, and the warm temperatures made it a very pleasant evening.

Church members placed a loud speaker on the roof, so people could hear recorded music and the dialogue of the children. Filling the seats were neighbors from a three-block radius: Roman Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and those who professed no religion at all. The church got a real donkey to transport "Mary" past the front of the church. The church's front door served as the inn.

The role of the innkeeper went to Facundo, a 12-year-old boy who had already grown to six feet tall. Facundo was the church caretaker's son and lived in the back part of the property. While large for his age, he was gentle of spirit. All the children loved him.

With the music playing softly from the roof, Joseph led the donkey that carried Mary and stopped in front of the "inn" and knocked. Facundo opened the door and stood in the doorway. When he saw the donkey, and Mary sitting on it, his eyes grew wide. He had been given two lines. The first was: "There is no room in the inn." Later he was to say, "We have a stable you can use."

"Joseph" asked for a room. That was the cue for Facundo's first line. Facundo kept looking at Mary on the donkey and said nothing. Soft, nervous laughter started coming from the audience. A prompter from behind the church door softly repeated Facundo's line. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Facundo said his line aloud. Joseph insisted. "But we have come on a long journey, and my wife is due to have a baby."

Facundo looked at the donkey that carried Mary and looked at Mary. The prompter whispered his line once again from the other side of the door. "There is no room in the inn," repeated Facundo, this time with

hesitancy. He stood in the doorway watching. Joseph insisted again. "We are so tired; do you know anywhere we can stay?"

This was the cue for Facundo's second line. He looked at the donkey and Mary and Joseph. The prompter softly said his line from the other side of the door. Again, a nervous murmur came over the audience. The prompter repeated the line.

Facundo stood still, looking at the couple. Then he blurted out, "You can have my room!" pointing to the back of the church property. There was silence. Joseph just looked at Facundo and said nothing. It wasn't supposed to go this way. If Facundo had said his lines correctly, Mary and Joseph would have gone to the end of the sidewalk in front of the church, where there was a "stable" prepared for them.

Finally, Mary broke the ice. "Okay," she said. "That's really nice of you." She dismounted from the donkey. The caretaker led the donkey away, and Joseph and Mary went through the door of the "inn" to stay in Facundo's room. (<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/room-at-the-inn/>, accessed 12/7/16).

Can Jesus have your room? Can he have your heart, your life? Will we be like Joseph and claim Jesus as our own? Will we welcome the Savior who forgives us, sets us free, and gives new life?