

Called before Birth

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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All 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." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Theme Statement

As we remember the story of the angel's announcement to Joseph, we live with a greater awareness of God's abiding presence in our circumstances.

Exploring the Word

Call stories in scripture are always set within a broader context. God's work to restore relationships, community, and ultimately our connection to God's own self is done in, with, and through the lives of multiple people. A single individual has his or her part to play.

Matthew 1:18-19 The character of Joseph

Attitudes toward out-of-wedlock pregnancy vary among cultures and times. In first-century Judaism, an engagement was as binding as marriage, but physical relations were not allowed until the actual marriage occurred. Sexual activity with someone outside the engaged relationship was even worse.

Matthew gives the reader a glimpse of Joseph's character to help us see the environment into which Jesus will be born. He clearly states that Joseph and Mary were engaged, but that they had not lived together when she was found to be pregnant. It was not until the angel came to Joseph in a dream that he knew who had gotten Mary pregnant. He knew it was not himself! At this point he could have exposed her condition, which would result in her social ostracism at least and could have meant she would be stoned to death. Matthew describes Joseph as "righteous," indicating that being a faithful Jew was his primary frame of reference. But, according to Matthew, Joseph was also compassionate toward Mary and planned on divorcing her quietly. Her actions would not harm his place in Jewish society. His actions would not cause extensive harm to her either.

Matthew 1:20-21 A change of plans

We note that once Matthew portrays Joseph's character, the true nature of Mary's pregnancy is disclosed. The earthly father of Jesus displays the same characteristics of mercy and compassion as does his heavenly Father.

There is another dreamer in scripture named Joseph. In Genesis 37 and 40, this Joseph both has dreams and interprets them. This Joseph is another person who is part of the redemption and liberation story of the Jewish people. In Matthew 1:21, the later Joseph learns that God is at work in his life in order to accomplish the same mission.

The Holy Spirit is not just a New Testament expression of God. From the first creation account (Genesis 1:2) we know that it hovers over the chaos of creation and is part of bringing order from chaos. It blows through the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) and brings what appears lifeless back to life. And here, Matthew attributes Mary's pregnancy to the same Spirit.

Matthew 1:22-23 The connection to history

Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 both to explain Mary's pregnancy and to tie Jesus' story to the Jewish tradition of the Messiah. This is an interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture that was gaining influence during the time between the Old and New Testaments (primarily, the second and first centuries BCE). There was a growing expectation that a messiah would soon appear and liberate the region from Roman control. Matthew points to Jesus as this liberator.

Matthew 1:24-25 The call embraced

Joseph's plans were changed, and he embraced his role in the next revelation of God's plan. It was customary that when a man gave a child his or her name—in this case, Jesus, son of Joseph—he was accepting that child as his own. This action also incorporated Jesus into the line of David (1:1, 17).

In the midst of Joseph's decision, God has come with an angelic message of clarity and purpose. The result of that visitation is the brave, faith-based decision by a person who had a history and commitment to the faith community.

The Word Today

Mike was born in 1959. His parents were ecstatic when they learned of the pregnancy, as they had been trying to start a family for several years. But a few months after the celebration of the announcement, his mother contracted measles. (The vaccine would not be available until four years after his birth.) The next months were a mixture of hope and worry.

When Mike arrived, the doctors reported what they had feared: he was born with some obvious special needs, and it was likely that he would never walk. Other conditions were also probable. The doctors recommended that Mike be sent to an institution, as he would probably never live past the age of five. They said people would understand, as that was the common practice of the time.

As people of active faith, in a rural community with strong connections to others, Mike's parents chose to keep him at home. His mother, a primary teacher, worked with him to learn the basics every child needs. He also gained mobility by walking with braces and forearm crutches. He attended classes in the public schools before mainstreaming was a common practice. Mike connected with classmates at school, was active in his local congregation, was part of the community through Scouts, and even reached out to the world through amateur radio. He held a job as an adult. Mike lived happily to the age of forty-five.

Mike's family's Christian faith influenced their decisions after Mike was born. The challenges and uncertainties they faced were surely overwhelming, but they knew the faith community surrounded them with support, encouragement, and prayer.

Difficult choices come to all people at some time in their lives. Some require not doing what most others would do, but rather responding to a greater purpose. Still other choices come at great personal sacrifice but can bring great blessing to the community. Joseph's gracious and compassionate decision to preserve Mary's dignity was exemplary. His embrace of God's greater plan was even more so. And his choice of "sleeping on it" before enacting his decision is a good model for us whenever possible.

Responding to God's call is not something one takes lightly. It requires confidence in God's love when hard decisions need to be made. It simultaneously draws one into the community and sets them apart from it. It becomes the only choice the person called can do and live with confidence. It immerses them in God's presence in a new way.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Place the following situations in order from easiest to hardest when it comes to making decisions:
 - ___ What to make for dinner
 - ___ What to wear to worship
 - ___ Where to buy groceries
 - ___ Where to live
 - ___ How to share your blessings
 - ___ When to end a relationship
2. How would you help another person come to a decision in a challenging situation?

Exploring the Word

1. We know "the rest of the story," but what challenges would Joseph have had to consider as he worked through the decisions about his relationship with Mary at this point in the narrative? Make a list.
2. What can we infer about the support Joseph had as we read Matthew's description of him?
3. Matthew describes Joseph as righteous, yet he doesn't insist on observing the law that required Mary's execution. Would you still call him righteous? Why or why not?
4. Joseph had access to prophetic voices in the Jewish tradition. Look up the following passages and describe how they might have influenced his decisions:

Micah 6:6-8

Psalm 51:1

Isaiah 58:6-11

Exodus 34:6-7

The Word Today

1. What voices do you listen to when you have a difficult decision to make?
2. Which of the following responses have you had from the faith community in response to a difficult decision? (Check all that apply.)
 - ___ How can we help?
 - ___ Are you sure you want that?
 - ___ You're not welcome here.
 - ___ We love you.
 - ___ I can't imagine how hard this decision is/was.
 - ___ Let's pray together.

Closing Prayer

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 76)

Further Study

Matthew 2; Joseph's further dreams ensure Jesus' safety

Daily Readings

M. Isaiah 7:10-15

F. Luke 2:34-38

T. Isaiah 42:1-9

S. Ruth 4:9-17

W. Isaiah 49:1-7

S. Matthew 1:18-25

T. Luke 1:26-38

Memorization

Matthew 1:20b-21

[An angel of the Lord 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."