

Signs and Faithfulness

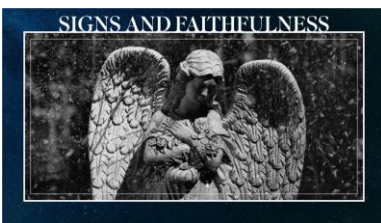
December 21, 2025 (7)

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: ²³ Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

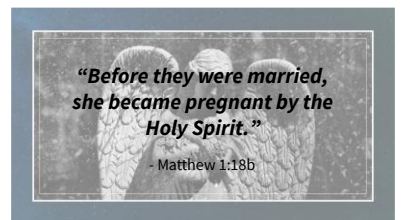


As we enter into Matthew 1 today, we do so by first acknowledging the cultural norms of the day. Almost all marriages were arranged by parents and/or family members. The marriage between Joseph and Mary had likely been arranged by Mary's father and Joseph or Joseph's dad. Documents had been signed, handshakes exchanged, a plan had been laid. Whether he was the one who arranged the marriage or not, Joseph had a plan. He was betrothed to Mary. The groom was often older than the bride. And, from inferences made through other passages, many believe that Joseph had been married once already. This would explain the brothers and sisters of Jesus that we meet later in the story.

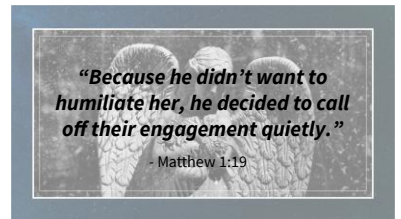
In Matthew 1:18 we read that this is how Jesus' birth took place. Mary was engaged to Joseph. That was step one of plan A. The next steps would be marriage then children then raising children then... A wedding date was probably on the calendar. Dreams of a family were probably dancing in Mary's and Joseph's heads. But then comes an obstacle, a turn when one wasn't expected. That happens in our lives too, doesn't it? We have our plan all laid out, we've figured out the steps, and then suddenly the plan isn't the plan anymore. Most of the time, this disruption is not a really big deal. We make an adjustment and life goes on. But sometimes we have a disruption like Joseph has. As we prepare to dive into today's passage, let us pray...

God of Mystery, we have heard the promise of your grace; but we find it hard to trust. Speak to us again, that we may hear, and know, and trust in our bones the coming of your blessing and your sure presence among us. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. It is with this request for your presence that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

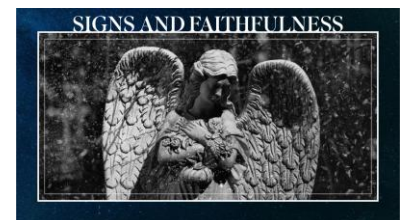
As we turn to the second half of verse 18 in Matthew 1, we see what disrupted Joseph's plan A. Here we read, *"Before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit."* Now, even though neither Joseph nor we really understand what it means to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, we all know what "pregnant" means. And Joseph, who is identified as a righteous man, knows that he is not the father. He and Mary have not engaged in physical relations. Mary is pregnant. This is an interruption to plan A that is so severe, so final, well, plan A cannot continue in any way, shape, or form. A whole new plan is needed.



Joseph must come up with a new plan, a plan that deals with the one who drove the whole plan A off the edge of a cliff. I bet that is how Joseph feels when he learns that Mary is pregnant. But because Joseph is a righteous man, the new plan will include grace. In verse 19 we read, *“Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.”* This was an act full of grace and mercy. Joseph had every right to drag Mary through the mud, to humiliate her. That would have been the norm. For a man to call off a wedding and to save face, blame would be placed squarely on the woman. That’s how that society worked. However, plan B was about dignity and mercy and grace.



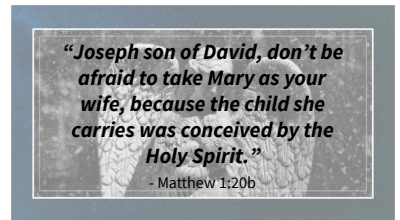
Joseph probably did not understand what it meant to be *“pregnant by the Holy Spirit,”* but he likely chose to extend grace to Mary because he understood that he did not understand what was happening. We’ve all been on both sides of this situation. We have been in situations where we’ve felt wronged and didn’t understand all the thinking, the motivation, the decisions, but we have chosen to extend grace to the other person anyway. And we’ve all been the person who has wronged someone else, and they didn’t know why or understand but still chose to give us grace. This is the unconditional grace modeled by Jesus. It is the grace that we are called to model with one another. This grace, actively lived out in our lives, is a sign of our faithfulness to God’s love and to our call to love one another as God loves us.



News of the called off engagement would become public knowledge, and Mary would likely be embarrassed, but Joseph chose not to share the “why,” sparing Mary the humiliation and shame that would come with an unwed pregnancy. With Plan B in place, Joseph went to sleep for the night, prepared to move forward with the new plan the next day.

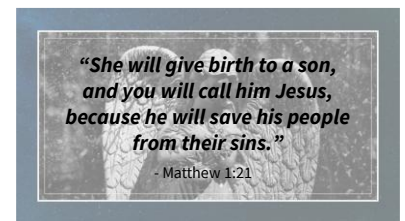
That night, in a dream, an angel from God came to Joseph and said, *“Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”*

Again, although Joseph did not likely understand what this whole Holy Spirit birth meant, he certainly now felt the weight of what was going on. Joseph most definitely knew that God was at work in what was happening.



That became even clearer as the angel continued, saying, *“She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”* These words and their meaning would

have connected to Joseph’s faith and upbringing as a devout Jew. As such, he would be anticipating the coming of a Messiah, of one who will rescue and save God’s people. Hearing these words from the angel moved Joseph’s plan B to plan C, which sounds a lot like plan A. While not exactly plan A, it is plan A redefined – and resurrected, elevated, intensified.



The plan returns to mostly was the plan was originally. Marriage, kids, parenting, working, growing old together. All of that would be the same - except it would be different. It would be different because Joseph was different. First, Joseph was now aware of God’s presence in his life. Second, Joseph is also aware that he is now part of a plan that he can’t imagine, let alone see. He knows that he is part of a plan that will transform the world. Joseph’s original plan A was to get married, to raise a family, to do the best he could with what he had. God’s revision of the plan was for Joseph to get married, to raise a family, and to do the best that he could do as a part of the plan to bring salvation, rescue, redemption, and restoration to the people of God and to the world. Talk about plan A resurrected, elevated, and intensified!



God was inviting Joseph to be a sign of faithfulness, to be a part of bringing abundant and eternal life to the world. In order to be that sign, Joseph must choose to continue to live a righteous and selfless life, putting the raising of Jesus ahead of all else,

sacrificing and doing whatever else was needed to help this new plan come to fruition. We know how the plan worked out in the end, so we know that Joseph was faithful and played the role that God invited him to play in the life of Jesus. Through Joseph, we can all see the way to faithful living. He set himself aside long enough to hear and accept the invitation of God to be a part of the transformation of the world. My friends, we are called to do the same. We are invited to be open to sensing the presence of God in our lives and in the world and to be open to hearing and responding to the call of God upon our lives.

Turning to verse 22, Matthew again becomes the narrator. Here we read, *“Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled.”* Matthew is again connecting his Jewish audience back to the promises of God found in the Hebrew scriptures. Quoting from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, which we read on Monday and Tuesday this week, Matthew reminds his audience that the virgin will become pregnant and will give birth to a son who will be called ‘Emmanuel,’ God with us. Continuing, Matthew tells us that Joseph awoke from that dream and did as God had commanded him, taking Mary as his wife, stepping into the plan that God had laid out for their lives and their family.

We do not know a lot about Joseph. He has mostly a “cameo” role in the Bible. In Matthew, in our gospel lesson today, we see him have a dream and obey the invitation to God’s call. In Luke’s gospel we see him go to Bethlehem, we see him take his family to Egypt and return, and later, in the background, we see Joseph help search for a lost 12-year-old Jesus.

But that's all we ever see or hear of Joseph. He never speaks a single word in the scriptures. Still, he can be a model for us. In Joseph's life we see humble obedience, a trust in God's promises, a faithful acceptance of God's guiding, and a commitment to what God is up to even though it looks unpromising and challenging.

Whenever Joseph appears in the scriptures, he is in a supporting role for Mary, who is the leading actor. In this way, he can be a model for us all in our willingness to take the back seat while we let others have center stage. At times we are all called to lead. And at other times, we are called to follow and to support and encourage. In that spirit, and maybe most importantly for us, we see in Joseph an unremarkable and ordinary person through whom God does remarkable and extraordinary things. These things happen primarily in the lives of the people that Joseph supports and encourages. When we speak of Christ being born in our hearts and being manifest in our lives, you may not be called to be a Mary. You might be at times. Or maybe you're called to be a Joseph, supporting Christ's birth in those around you, doing what needs done for the building of the kingdom of God here and now.

To know whether we're a Mary or a Joseph, so to speak, we must first be what they were willing to be: one who heard the call of God on their lives. I believe that God "speaks" to us all the time. Sometimes it is in the words of scripture, sometimes it is in a devotional that we read, sometimes it is in the words of faith that we hear spoken by another, sometimes it is in the whisper or nudge of the Holy Spirit, sometimes it is in the door that God opens or closes in our lives. In these ways and more, God is present to us, living in us, moving through us, leading and guiding us.

Once we hear the call, we again must do as Mary and Joseph did: we must respond to the call, stepping into whatever plan God has for us and for our lives. That can be hard, right? Mary and Joseph, pre-angel visits, has life pretty well planned out. Like I am sure it was for Mary and Joseph, this is the hardest when God wants to radically alter the plans that we have carefully laid. In those times, we can be tempted to ignore or to not listen to the plan. We can too easily resolve to dismiss the message, to quietly cover up the call with all of our busyness and distractions, especially during this busiest time of the year.

But instead of making our perfect lists and shopping until we find the perfect gift, instead of crazily trying to make every event, party, and gathering, may we choose to stop the rush to Christmas, to find some quiet time to hear God's voice, to prepare our hearts to receive the most perfect gift ever, Jesus Christ. We voiced this hope in the words of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" today. In verse 7 we sang, "*O come, desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; from dust thou brought us forth to life; deliver us from earthly strife.*" We long for God to be our heart's desire and for God to deliver us to life, saving us from the earthly strife that comes from living in this world. We long for God to bind our hearts and minds to the heart and mind of Christ. Bound to Jesus, we can rejoice because the Messiah has come to us, to be present to us, to dwell in us. May we all be filled with joy this week as we draw near to the night on which Christ was born. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you heard God's call lately? How did you respond? What did it or might it lead to? How has (or might) your faith grown as a result of responding?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might you be being invited to support, encourage... as Joseph did? Seek God's guidance in how to help others as they seek to serve the Lord.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 2:13-15. How is this quintessential Joseph? How might you respond if asked to do something similar by God?