

Give You a Sign

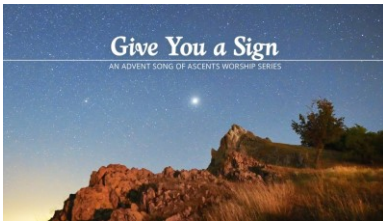
December 18, 2022

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.

Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.



In our Christmas text for today, Joseph has the central role.

Matthew's gospel is a bit unusual in that. In Mark and Luke,

Mary is the central character. In today's text, everything is

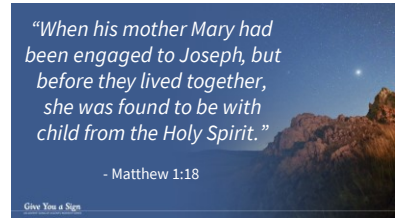
happening to Joseph, and he must respond to what is

happening. This would be an uncomfortable place for us to be in. If you are at all like me, you like to be in control, you like to be in charge of what is happening. At least this is what the world tries to tell us. Go to any bookstore and you'll find shelf after shelf of self-help books.

We want to hold the reins. We get frustrated and maybe a bit grumpy when things happen to us beyond our control. When you think about it, though, things often happen to us that are beyond our control. We too can feel like bystanders, like Joseph in today's unfolding story. We make plans. We find someone to love, and we make plans to get married, for example. Then things go wonky, and everything feels out of our control. We feel helpless and often put upon. We feel as if we are watching the world go by. That, my friends, is why we need to spend some time with Joseph. His plans were out of control. His life was out of *his* control. Someone had taken charge of his life. Now what?

Well, Joseph had a choice. We do too when we find ourselves in such situations. That's what we often forget when things feel out of control. We can lose sight of this perspective when life gets overwhelming. Yet there is still a choice to be made. We still have input. As we prepare to turn to Joseph's story now, let us pray...

Please turn with me to Matthew 1 as we explore Joseph's story and the choices he had to make. In verse 18 we learn that Joseph was engaged to Mary, but it was *"before they lived together."* In Judaism, engagement meant that two people were entering into a permanent relationship. An engagement could only be broken by legal processes. So for all legal and relational purposes, Joseph was Mary's husband, and she was his wife. The "but" in the middle of verse 18 implies that they had not been intimate yet. Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant – *"found to be with child,"* the scripture says. At this point, Joseph probably skipped over the *"from the Holy Spirit"* part. To be honest, I would if I were him.



At this point, Joseph has input to give. At least in his mind, he has a decision to make. Joseph had to decide his next step when life happened to him. In the next verse we get a wonderful glimpse into Joseph's heart. In verse 19 we learn that Joseph was first a *"righteous man."* That means that he tried to obey the Law. According to the Law, Joseph could not wed Mary because she was a suspected adulteress. There are two options at this point for Joseph. The first is to exonerate himself by publicly exposing Mary to a trial. The likely result in this trial would be Mary being put to death. Joseph's second option was to pay a fine and break off the engagement.

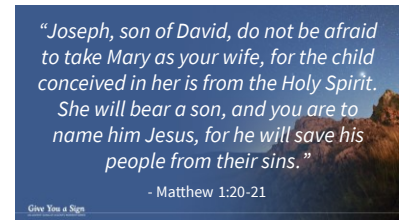
Joseph considered the situation and chose to do the kindest thing he could do. He would divorce Mary quietly. Joseph could have humiliated Mary as a means to restore his own status. He was the victim here. Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death or maybe just driven out from the community. Some would have held their image and place above the life of a young girl.

Remember, women were often seen as property in this time and culture. Joseph decided to choose the lightest of the options. He was simply going to set her aside, to *“dismiss her quietly.”* The marriage that was legalized but not yet consummated was over. The covenant had already been broken. For Joseph, it seemed best to just get out. Joseph was a righteous man.

Righteousness is a wonderful Biblical concept. Today when we hear this word, we often think pious, holy, better-than-thou. In the world, this word has taken on a meaning that feels difficult to live out. But in the Bible, righteousness is the highest of concepts. It is a word sometimes used to describe God. In a general sense, righteousness simple means being faithful to our covenants. When we keep our promises, when we do as we say we'll do, when we are obedient to God, then we are righteous. The overall story of the Bible is one of keeping and breaking covenants. Our lives tend to be the same – the story of being a disciple and of being a sinner.

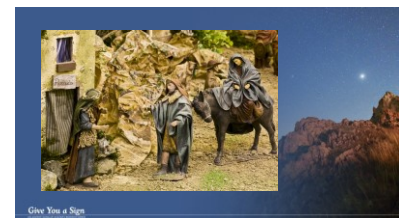
Joseph was obedient to the Law. He was a keeper of covenants. What he needed at this point was other options. God gave them to him in a dream. Just as Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary quietly, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. An angel visited Mary to assure her of God's plan. Joseph has a dream. For many of us, a dream would be easier to dismiss, to chalk up to our own imagination. How does Joseph know that this is God speaking and not he himself grasping at straws? Joseph was a righteous man. Here was a way that he could honor the covenant he made with Mary. Here was a way that he could keep his commitment to the woman he loved. Today we would call this a win-win situation.

The angel of the Lord says to Joseph, *“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.”* In these words Joseph is assured that Mary did not break the covenant either. Now, our concept of love and marriage are not the same as they were back then. Yet there is a deeper connection between Joseph and Mary. He likely would not have made the choice he initially did if he did not love her deeply.



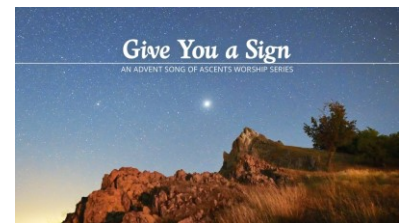
Even so, to accept this wild possibility, revealed in a dream no less, well, it shows that Joseph can see the bigger picture of what God is doing. Perhaps knowing that the child is conceived of the Holy Spirit also helped Joseph in his decision. You see, for the Jews, the Holy Spirit brought God’s truth to humankind. It was the Spirit that gave the prophets God’s word as needed. Because of all this, Joseph knew in his heart that what was happening was clearly the hand of God at work.

Skip forward in the story for a moment with me. I want to do so to reiterate what a hard choice Joseph made, even in spite of the dream. In almost a week’s time we will travel with Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, to the city of David. This is where David is from. Joseph has family there. Yet no one would take them in. We remember that there “was no room in the inn.” Well, there were no hotels or motels at this time in most towns, never mind in a small place like Bethlehem. What we are talking about is a spare room in a family’s home, kept for visiting family or for a traveler passing through.

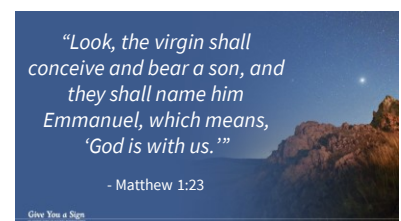


It was customary, required almost, to offer hospitality to those in need in this culture. This innkeeper that we think of in the Christmas story was not a businessman but was a member of Joseph's extended family. It was a family member or two or three that shut the door in Joseph's face and sent him and his suspiciously pregnant wife out into the dark, cold night, again and again.

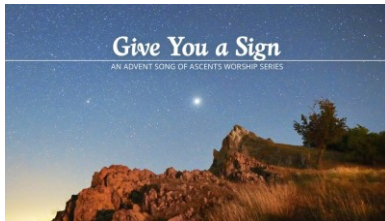
Like Joseph, our choices are not always easy to make or to live with. And like Joseph, we will sometimes be given a sign from God. Even so, sometimes the choices we make come with consequences. And sometimes they are painful or hurtful or both. Joseph made the hard choice to believe that God was at work in all of this. Even in a troubling situation we can see the sign that God gives us and we can choose to do the right thing, trusting that God's hand is guiding us. Doing so, choosing to honor our faith or a covenant or even a commitment, we too can choose the path of righteousness. Like Joseph, we are capable of seeing the bigger picture and of stepping out in faith.



Returning to the story, Joseph believes that the child **is** conceived by the Holy Spirit. Being faithful and righteous, Joseph connected back to the prophecy found in Isaiah 7. Matthew quotes from it in verse 23: *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”* With this assurance, Joseph awakes from the dream and *“did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”* What an amazing act of faith this was. Joseph did not wake up from his dream and try to shake the cobwebs out.



Pause for a minute and consider the faith it required to go against cultural norms and to believe that Mary, his Mary, had been chosen by God to be the portal through which God would enter the world... Think about that. What faith to welcome the signs that God was with them.



Signs can be messy business. We turn to Isaiah 7, to see just how messy signs from God can be. King Ahaz was the ruler of Judah, the smaller of the two kingdoms in a divided

nation of God. Amidst fears of invasion from Israel and two other allies, Isaiah goes to Ahaz and lets him know that he too is invited into the story that God is writing, saying, *“Ask a sign of the Lord your God.”* Ahaz is in a pickle and needs help from God. Isaiah invites him to bring God into the situation. The proud king says, *“I will not ask.”*

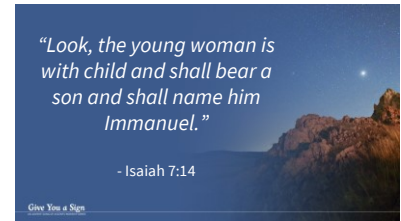
Scholars believe that Ahaz had already entered into negotiations with Assyria, the big kid on the block. In these words he really declares that he trusts in his alliance and not in God.

Maybe part of his “no thank you” also comes from what he has observed firsthand. The king might fear what happens when one allows God to give signs, to be at work in the lives of people. Ahaz has seen in Isaiah’s life what it looks like to have God at work. You lose control of the situation. You become second to God. So what Ahaz likely means by saying ‘no thank you’ here is this: “Keep me out of this God stuff.” King Ahaz is content with where he is, with his power and position, with his allegiances. And maybe he is a little afraid too. When God shows up, things can get a little upside down, a little unsettling. Ahaz wants nothing to do with God or with receiving a sign from God. It might cause him to change course. He is committed to himself.

In the words of this week's Advent devotional, King Ahaz is "refusing help and waiting for a disaster." God is undeterred. Through Isaiah, God gives the king a sign anyway.

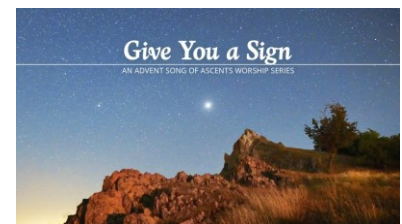
And the sign is this: *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel."*

Emmanuel – God with us. These words are echoed in the words spoken to Joseph in our passage from Matthew 1.



Turn back to Matthew 1 with me as we resume our journey with Joseph. Just to review, he saw the bigger picture of God that was unfolding around him. We too need eyes to see and faith to look for God's story in our lives. Joseph took the next step; he chooses to be a part of the story.

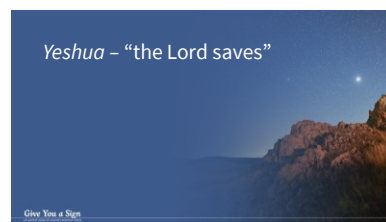
Joseph chose to step into this role that God invited him to. He chose to have everything to do with God, to become a sign of God's work in the world. Joseph decided to jump in with both feet, entering this world-changing drama. In faith Joseph takes Mary as his wife. In faith he will go on to serve Jesus as his earthly father.



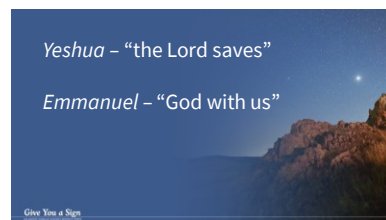
We too can make such a choice. When we choose to name Christ as the reason for our choices and decisions, when we choose to be obedient to God, when we decide to love and to honor and to serve both God and others, then we, like Joseph move from being a bystander to being an actor, to being a co-creator with God, to being a sign of God in the world. We, with God's help and direction, then also become a part of the unfolding story. We live as part of God's family, sharing God's peace, hope, joy, and love with the world.

As it was with Joseph, so it is with us. We must simply be willing to be obedient to the vision of the kingdom that God has given to each of us. Being willing, we become a greater and greater sign of this new kingdom by the choices and decisions that we make every day.

Turning to the last few verses, we see that there are two names given to this child to be born in a manger. With both names, Matthew gives a sign pointing to who and what this baby will be. The common one that we know is the word translated as “Jesus.” In the Hebrew language this name would have been *Yeshua*. In Hebrew, this word or name translates to “the Lord saves.” This name is so appropriate. Jesus, our Lord, will save his people from their sins. We are his people. By giving his life for ours and for all who fall short of his glory, Jesus will become our Savior, redeeming us from our sin. This “common” name points us towards the only one who can save us.



The other name, which only appears here in Matthew’s gospel, is Emmanuel, “God with us.” This name – Emmanuel – is also a sign. Matthew reaches back to the prophets, allowing this name to point to something long awaited. This



name reminds us that we are not alone. God is with us. We are not simply bystanders, living our own lives. We are participants with God, seeking to also be Emmanuel, God with us, to one another, to be God incarnate with one another. May this be our choice this week. May we choose to be the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, to all we meet, sharing the sign that God is with us. May it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Think back to times when God has given (or tried to give) you a sign, a word, or a whisper to guide you. How did (or could've) growth come from these times when God reached out to you?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that could use a little more God this week? Pray for God's guidance concerning how you could be that this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Isaiah 9:1-7. How would these words encourage Joseph as he decided what to do with Mary and what to do when the "inn" refused them lodging? How do these words give you hope?