



Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Did you ever have a dream that was so detailed that when you woke up, you believed that it really happened? Or have you ever been in that dream state right before you wake up that you feel like you are actually living in the dream? That it seems so very real? You may even retain memories of that dream. And yet, you come to realize that it was just a dream and you let it go.

This is the third message in our Angels of Christmas series. In the first message we talked about how Zechariah had been visited by an angel while he was serving at the temple. The angel spoke to him to let him know that his elderly, barren wife Elizabeth, was going to have a baby and that he was to name that baby John. That this baby would be a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the coming Messiah. We also learned that Zechariah didn't quite believe what the angel was telling him and for that reason, he was made mute until the birth of his miracle child, John, who would become known as John the Baptist.

Last week we talked about that same angel visiting Mary to let her know that she was going to have a child, even though she was a virgin. And unlike Zechariah, she stepped into her role as the mother of the son of God without hesitation. We learned that she visited her relative Elizabeth while she was pregnant only to have the angel's words confirmed when Elizabeth's baby jumped when Mary entered into the house of Zechariah. We listened as the angel spoke into Mary to put God's seal on the prophecy by saying **"For no word from God will ever fail."**

And Mary's response was one of commitment as she accepted her role by saying **"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."** We also acknowledged that it was going to be difficult for Mary to explain to her family, friends and fiancé the story of the angel's visit and what was about to transpire.

We read of many instances in the Old Testament about how God speaks to individuals through dreams. We look at Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph, Pharaoh, Jacob and many others where dreams are either portents of the future, admonishments of sin or messages that are meant to spur action. There are dreams in the New Testament as well. We read about the nightmare of Pontius Pilate's wife's and about what was going to happen if Pilate crucified Jesus. John has his dream on the island of Patmos about Revelations. The Wise Men had a dream not to return to Herod after they had found Jesus. Dreams are a very real way that God can speak into us, especially if those dreams come in the form of a messenger, like an angel.

So, when we read about Joseph being visited by an angel in a dream, is it any less of a message from God just because it comes in the form of a dream? Should we discount the message because the message is embedded in that dream? I asked you in the first message if you believed in angels. I ask you now, do you truly believe that God can communicate to you through dreams? Before you ask me, I will tell you that I do not know why God sent an angel through

Joseph's dreams rather than in a wakened state. But what I can tell you is that God speaks to us in the way that we are best able to accommodate and receive the message. He will communicate with us in a way that will best allow us to embrace His message, a way in which we are more likely to listen and appreciate the message. We all learn differently, and we all communicate at different levels. It is what makes being a teacher such a difficult job. In order to reach a class of 30 students, the teacher may have to communicate the same message 30 different ways in order to enable all of the students to understand and comprehend the what is being taught. It is possible that if Gabriel had come in the flesh to deliver the message to Joseph, it may have fallen on deaf ears.

Let's take time to examine what is happening in context so that we can appreciate the message that God sends to Joseph, and the manner in which he sends it. We do have to read between the lines a little bit in this instance, simply because we don't have all the information, but I think that we have enough that we can extrapolate what is going on. The timeline of events is important to us as we try to understand Joseph and what is going through his mind. The first three verses of our scripture today say this:

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

When we look at the timeline, we see these events in this order:

- 1. Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. They were engaged. All parties involved had agreed to this marriage.**
- 2. Before they could take their vows, it was discovered that Mary was pregnant through the Holy Spirit.**
- 3. Joseph was faithful to the law which means that he had every right not to go through with the marriage. After all, his fiancé was pregnant with a baby that was not his.**
- 4. We see an amazingly compassionate side of Joseph. He does not want to embarrass Mary even though he probably feels he is the one that has been wronged in this situation. He is trying to process a great deal of information at this time and he is struggling to make everything work with the least amount of trouble for everyone involved, especially Mary. I do not believe that he is looking for a reason to back out of the marriage. Doing so was almost expected. It was not just a religious matter but a matter of law. There were perceived broken promises, extreme emotions, not to mention his own promises and reputation. But above all was his concern for Mary, which makes him very much a man struggling to balance His love for God and the Law with the facts that he had been presented with.**
- 5. While his mind is going back and forth, God sends an angel to assure him in a dream, that everything is going to work out because this is all part of God’s plan.**

What we do not see in this passage is Mary telling Joseph of her encounter with the angel Gabriel, and that is extremely important. I truly believe that the conversation did occur even it was never recorded. It really doesn't matter whether she told Joseph before she got pregnant or when they learned that she was pregnant. What matters is that that there was surely a conversation that took place where Mary acknowledges that she is pregnant and that she had an encounter with an angel where she was told that the pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit. We also know that Joseph was somewhat skeptical because he is struggling, not with her story, but with the pregnancy itself. In truth, he was probably chalking up her story to the imaginations of a young girl facing a very difficult situation. But you can hardly fault Joseph for being human. After all, at this time he has not been visited by the angel in his dreams. He was just trying to take everything that was being thrown at him and make sense of it all.

If what Mary said was true, how did Joseph fit into this story?

Was he even meant to be a part of this story?

Why would God allow him to be put in this confounding and confusing situation and what was expected of him?

Let's face it, if he embraced the story that Mary was telling him, how was he supposed to be a father figure to the Son of God?

In these days of blended families, we often find ourselves asking many of the same questions. Struggling to find our balance as we accept roles of stepmother or stepfather can be extremely difficult for everyone involved. Boundaries need to be established so that everyone is on the same page. Everyone wants to do what is best for the children involved. But what does that mean and what does that entail? We need to be very careful not to cross lines that will damage the family relationships. That can be a very tricky thing indeed.

Joseph was looking beyond his own reputation. He was also looking beyond Mary's reputation. If he chose to believe Mary's story and step into this undefined role as father figure to the Son of God, then there are a great number of things that he needs to consider and he must have felt somewhat overwhelmed and under-appreciated as the situation evolved around him without his input. Just like all of us, he must have been searching for some sense of control. But at this time, he had no way to verify Mary's story and it certainly sounded impossible, like she was trying to explain away the unexplainable. And when you add the fact that Caesar Augustus is sending out a decree that forces every man to go to his birthplace to be taxed, it had to be so totally mind blowing, almost to the point of chaos. Imagine facing the greatest crisis of your life and getting a phone call from the IRS letting you know that you are going to be audited.

But here's the thing, God knew what he was expecting of Joseph. He knew the role that Joseph was going to need to play in the raising of the Christ Child. He knew the pressure that Joseph was under and the decisions that needed to be made. And God stepped in. And he stepped in in a way that would help Joseph find balance rather than overwhelm him even more. He sent an angel in a dream to let him know that everything that Mary said was true. The angel validated the

story which brought assurance. Assurance that this was a God situation. Assurance that God had everything under control. Assurance that God had his back as Joseph stepped into the promise of God and that his role was in no way... insignificant; that there was purpose to everything that was happening.

It was just the push that Joseph needed. It tipped the balance in his decision-making process. We read in the 24th verse of our scripture today:

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

There was no hesitation here. He hears the message of assurance and acts on it. The fog clears and his decision is not only different from the norm, it is swayed to the point that allows him to feel confident that this decision is the right one.

There are times in our lives where we face choices that are unclear, that more than one path appears to be the correct one. But we also know that choosing the wrong path could lead to disaster. That people could get hurt. That we can fall short and disappoint the people around us. That choosing the wrong path means that we might fail in our relationships with each other and with our God. But, no matter how hard we try, we cannot definitively see the path that we are expected to take.

It is in times like these that we face our own humanity, our own greed, our own desires and what we feel will best resolve things in our favor. We lean towards the path that will provide us with the least amount of struggle, but will also provide us with the greatest security, the path that is greener and safer. But when we do this, we are using our own internal compasses to determine that path. We truly want to do the right thing, but the right thing looks so much like the wrong thing and the wrong thing looks so much like the right thing.

Do we choose the safer path, the one that meets the letter of the law, the one that might prove to be more profitable? Or do we choose the more difficult path that we know will be a struggle? Do we choose that difficult path because we believe that God wants us to struggle so that we can be made stronger? These are legitimate questions.

Either way, we are using the wrong parameters to make our decision. We do not choose a path because it is an easy path or a hard path, because it is uphill or downhill, because it leads to riches or leads to poverty, because it is greater in stature or less in stature. We do not choose a path because others have chosen the same path. We choose a path because it is God's path. And the only way we know that path is by letting Him speak into us. He might use an angel. He might use a dream. He might speak to us through a stranger or a friend. We just need to make ourselves available, knowing that He will choose the means that will best

guide us in our choice. We need to have faith that He will illuminate the path that He wants us to take, and we should expect some resistance no matter what path He sends us down. Resistance from our own selfishness and also from people that we love and people that want to watch our for us.

But the greatest thing to realize is that when He does speak into us, it is with the expectation that, like Joseph, we will find comfort and clarity in the message and act on it, even if it contrary to what we feel is best for us. Let God speak into you with regards to all your decisions, great and small. Let Him illuminate the correct path so that He can be glorified. Sometimes, we need to make the hard choices before the miracle can happen. God can and will guide us through those choices if we will only let Him.

AMEN