

That Changes Everything  
December 22, 2013  
Matthew 1:18-25

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy designed to set the context for the story of Jesus. That account flows from Abraham through David to Joseph.

Our Scripture reading immediately follows this genealogy. It affords us insight into Joseph's encounter with an angel, which, for him, was an experience that changed everything.

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.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Loving One, we trust that you spoke to Joseph and have spoken to many others throughout the ages. Help us to know you as a Still Speaking God, and to hear your words for us this day. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

We live in an age when people have come to expect things to happen quickly. People want what they want when they want it.

Why can't Christmas arrive now? This is a question asked every day by children.

How much longer do we have to wait? Our constant reminders include two simultaneous countdowns: (1) the consumer driven reminder of the number of shopping days till Christmas and (2) the sacred countdown till the arrival of a newborn who will change the world.

Even our waiting seems to be different than it once was. In the words of a contemporary song:

December comes then disappears  
faster and faster every year  
did my own mother keep this pace  
or was the world a different place?<sup>1</sup>

No matter how fast events may transpire, each day still lasts 24 hours. With instant everything just the click of a mouse, push of a button, or phone call away, waiting for days and days can seem intolerable.

Earlier this week I discovered a short video that communicates a great deal. For those who may wish to see it, I posted it on my blog yesterday. It was created by an Australian church, and is titled "InstaChristmas."

In just over a minute, it tells the story using over 600 Instagram images. The pictures tell the story in an unconventional yet contemporary way over a period of nine months moving

from expressions of surprise to positive pregnancy tests,  
from ultrasounds to images of women with ever larger pregnant forms,  
from a journey that includes hotels lacking vacancy to childbirth,  
from a star that guides to wise ones who travel with gifts.

Rather than either focusing on people's experience today or retelling the ancient story, InstaChristmas does both. It also calls us make the journey so that we too might be ready to come and adore him.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Eaton and Amy Grant. "I Need a Silent Night."  
<<http://www.metrolyrics.com/i-need-a-silent-night-lyrics-amy-grant.html>>

<sup>2</sup> InstaChristmas. <[http://youtu.be/IGx98I\\_utNI](http://youtu.be/IGx98I_utNI)>

I can't speak for Joseph, but I think it is likely we all know what he wanted. After all, he was a young man engaged to an even younger woman. They were preparing to begin their life together as husband and wife. Families were involved. Friends knew about their plans. In fact, everyone knew thanks to the reality of small town life.

Keep in mind that they lived in another time and in a different culture. In their world "betrothals were as binding as marriage" is in ours.<sup>3</sup>

That framework was an unspoken and understood part of the background; the real focus was simple: their hearts were united in love. Joseph was likely counting down the days before the wedding. He was looking forward to consummating their relationship. Together they were likely imagining not only their union, but also starting a family.

We know what was planned, but what do we really know about the young couple? Who was this Joseph guy? What type of character did he have?

Many think of him as a carpenter. According to this morning's reading, he was a righteous man. Joseph was the sort of person parents want in a prospective partner for their children. He was religious in a good way. He not only knew about his faith, but also lived it out on a daily basis.

This is what makes the news so hard to process. Joseph found out the woman he loved was pregnant. He knew he wasn't the father. He knew that he had to part ways. This was the only realistic option.

The only decision he had was how to proceed. He could go with Plan A or Plan B.

Plan A meant doing what was required. He could take legal action that would result in a divorce and restore a 100% refund of monies he or his family may have paid as a bride-price as well as impound any funds her father may have put into a dowry. This would mean he could restore his good name, and make it clear she was the one to blame – the one who had been unfaithful. It would also mean her life, whatever was left of it, would be miserable.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener. "Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A" in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

Plan B meant parting ways quietly. By separating ways in front of a few witnesses rather than in a more public legal proceeding he would allow her to retain some sense of honor. It also meant he would not be able to clear his name. It was, however, a choice he would make because he cared so deeply about her and about doing what he felt was right according to his faith.<sup>5</sup>

Now we are starting to get it. Joseph was a genuinely good guy. No matter how hurt, confused, and even angry he was that his bride-to-be was pregnant by someone else, he continued to elevate her wellbeing above his own.

Then it happens. The moment that changes everything arrives. Our Still Speaking God shows up in the form of an angel and delivers news that was so unexpected it probably didn't sink in all at once.

I suspect you have heard this encounter many times before I read it to you this morning. Listen again to what happened, in contemporary language:

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant.

She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus - 'God saves' - because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term: Watch for this - a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; They will name him Emmanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us")<sup>6</sup>

Immediately, Joseph flip-flops. He goes from being certain he must divorce Mary to knowing he must marry her.

God has shown him a better way. Rather than seeking to live by the letter of the law, he chooses to be guided by the greatest commandment: love.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The Message. Matthew 1:20-23

Guided by the strength of this love, he recommits himself to his relationship with Mary. He continues with the engagement. Joseph marries Mary. He abstains from sexual relations with her until after she gives birth to a son, whom he names Jesus.

This is a story worth telling again and again.

While at this time of year we often focus on Mary's incredible obedience, it is important to recognize that Joseph is also an exemplar in this regard. Together they serve to remind us that God desires our obedience not our brilliance.

Maybe you are growing uncomfortable now. Perhaps you are looking at your watch or checking your smartphone.

Are you in a hurry?

Are you counting down the minutes till this service of worship ends?

Are you all too well aware that this is December 22, and that Christmas is now just a few days away?

Keep watching and waiting. You never know when you will have the opportunity to live out your faith by sharing your love of God by loving one of God's children.

Keep preparing and pondering. You never know when a moment that changes everything will arrive.

Be ready for the coming of Emmanuel.

No matter who you are or where you are on the Advent journey, God welcomes you and will honor your obedience. Amen.