

## **Angels Among Us: Do Not Be Afraid**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

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I'm not sure there is a character in the nativity story who is more overlooked and undervalued than Joseph. After all, we usually use Luke's gospel to tell the story, and Luke, with wonder and awe, tells us of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, angel visits and shepherds, and, of course, the miraculous birth of Jesus. But Joseph barely gets a mention. He just hovers in the background quietly playing his part.

The Gospel of Matthew, on the other hand, gives us Joseph's story, helping us to understand how important Joseph is to the bigger picture of God's salvific work through Jesus. Unlike Luke whose audience was primarily Gentiles, Matthew wrote his gospel for Jewish Christians. These folks were struggling to hold onto their Jewish faith and teachings at the same time as they embraced Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew hoped to make them understand that belief in Jesus was not antithetical to Jewish beliefs but rather the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies. One of those prophecies was that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. So, Matthew knows that for this audience, Joseph's role is key because he can trace his lineage straight back to David and, because he adopted Jesus, Jesus can, too.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the beginning of Joseph's story. Joseph was a carpenter betrothed to a young woman, a virgin, named Mary. In Jewish culture, betrothal was the first act of marriage. So, although they are not yet living together and she is still a virgin, Mary and Joseph are technically married. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, meaning that he carefully followed the Jewish laws. When he learned that Mary was pregnant, he faced a difficult decision. Fortunately, once again, an angel came to intervene.

This angel is the third in our sermon series "Angels Among Us". Each angel has come as a messenger from God bearing important news. First, we spoke about the angel who visited Zechariah and announced that he and Elizabeth would become parents despite their advanced years; then, we heard the Angel Gabriel announce to Mary that she would give birth to God's son.

Now, we've come to Joseph, and while his role may seem minor by comparison, he has a lot to teach us. According to his story, by the time his angel comes to call, Joseph already knows about Mary's pregnancy. We can imagine his first response was shock and bewilderment. How can this be? Understandably, he assumes that she has been with another man, and that leaves him worrying about what to do.

As the husband in a male-dominant society, the decision was his. He would decide Mary's fate and his own. His community would expect him to divorce her, but this would be devastating for Mary and for her baby. Left without a man to care for them, they would likely become destitute and potentially starve to death. Of course, he also had the option of charging her with adultery, which could easily mean she would be stoned to death. But, to stay married to her now would be to lose his honor and the respect of his community. Plus, he still doesn't know

what happened. Why would Mary be unfaithful to him? Whose child was this? And would Mary do this again?

Joseph's responses are all very relatable. We do this all the time. Frankly, we humans don't do very well when faced with the unexpected - especially when we don't know the back story. There is nothing that makes us more anxious and worried than not knowing what happened and why. We depend on the stability of knowing what to expect. We want the assurance that comes with rules, laws, and predictability. We feel in control when we know what is happening and how to react.

So, when something unexpected comes along, often our first response is anxiety and worry. And then, like Joseph, without information or explanation, we create an explanation of our own - we make assumptions. Guessing what is going on feels better than not knowing at all.

Unfortunately, we tend to assume the worst. Joseph has pretty good evidence to support assuming the worst - that Mary has been unfaithful. Yet, he doesn't know that for sure. I'm sure we can all think of times when we've done the same thing. You find a mole on your skin and spend hours worrying about it, assuming it is cancer, before you ever see the doctor. Your boss asks to see you and you assume that you're about to be reprimanded. Your teenager misses curfew and you assume they are up to trouble. An employee makes a surprising decision and you assume they are incompetent.

But here is where we can learn something from Joseph. Though he does make an assumption about Mary, he does not go on to judge her or to seek retribution. Instead, he responds with kindness and grace. Though he believes she has done something terribly wrong, he stops there rather than publicly shaming her, denouncing her as an adulteress, or nursing a sense of betrayal.

In this time we are living through, with all the uncertainty and change, division and fear, we are all making a lot of assumptions about each other. I see it in marriages and friendships when people come to me for counseling. I see it at times in the business of the church. And, of course, we see it on the political stage where the right and the left both assume they know the other's beliefs and motivations.

Yet, as Joseph shows us, assumptions can have potentially dire consequences. They can lead to resentment, to hurt, to broken relationships, to pouring energy into conflict, and to long, painful diversions from the path we once were on. Imagine how much more peaceful we would feel, how much less conflict there would be, if we were to stop and examine our assumptions before they can ever evolve into judgments and punishments.

Of course, all of this starts with fear. We are frightened of the unexpected and our imaginations run wild with the worst case scenarios. That's why I find the angel's words to Joseph so powerful. Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid of what other people will think. Do not be afraid of whether Mary is trustworthy. Do not be afraid of what the future might bring.

And then Matthew reminds us of these words from Isaiah. *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel.* Emmanuel, God is with us.

We don't need to worry about all the things we don't know or can't control, we don't need to be frightened of change, we don't need to assume and blame and judge. God is with us.

Because Joseph chooses kindness and grace over judgment and retribution, his heart stays open to God's message. The angel explains that this child Mary is carrying is the Son of God, and Joseph believes. The angel tells him to continue his betrothal to Mary, to take her into his home and begin to build a life with her. With the assurance of an angel and a heart open to how God might be working through him, Joseph does exactly that.

Of course, saying yes to God comes with some risk for him, and that is true for us, as well. Yet, he chooses to take that risk out of his faith in God and God's promises. He takes his courage from trusting that God is at work for the good of the world in ways he might not yet see or understand. And thank God he does because had Joseph said no, had he divorced Mary, had she become destitute or been stoned to death, what would have become of her baby? This baby, who was God in the flesh, who came to redeem us, to heal us, and to show us in his words and his actions the power of love.

In the 2000 years since Jesus was born, our world has seen a lot of war and violence, disease and poverty, upheaval and change. Surely we are living in such a time right now. Yet, there have always been those who followed in the footsteps of Joseph. Those who chose a path of grace rather than judgment. Those who were open to hear what God was asking of them. And those who chose to believe that despite all evidence to the contrary, God is with us now and is continuously working for the healing and wholeness of God's creation. May we be those people in our generations.

In this last week before Christmas, may you prepare yourself for the coming of the Prince of Peace by examining your own life. Where are you making assumptions without knowing the whole story? Have your assumptions turned to judgments? Are you mired in the muck of resentment? Can you stop, listen for the voice of angels, and open your heart to love and grace and the promise of a newborn in a manger?

May it be so. Amen.