

A Call to Protect – Joseph
The Call of Christmas – III
December 11, 2016

Call to Worship:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

We are halfway through the Advent season and our series “The Call of Christmas” as we have once again looked at the primary people of the first Christmas story. So far the people we have looked at have been pretty exemplary people. We started with the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who we are told in the Bible were both “righteous and blameless in the eyes of God.” Then last week Alex looked at Mary, who we are told was a virgin. While she might have been young and a virgin, those were not the only reasons she was chosen. Mary too had exemplary character. While she might not have been sinless like the Roman Catholics believe, she had to be pretty special, after all she was to carry the Christ child, the future Messiah, the Holy One of Israel inside her for nine months. For all of history after, she will be referred to by many as “the mother of God.” It is rather absurd to think that God would choose anyone who was not close to being holy for such a very important assignment. Her response to the angel Gabriel showed her exemplary character: “Behold, I am the Lord’s servant; let it be to me according to your word.”

The first three people that we have looked at so far in the first “Call of Christmas” were pretty exemplary people and they all responded in quite a positive manner, in a relatively short period of time. Today we look at our fourth person of the original “Call of Christmas” and in order to do that we need to go to the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy which points to the fulfillment of a long awaited prophecy that begins with Abraham and ends with the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. Yet Matthew does it in a rather odd, almost unprecedented way. Genealogies in that day were usually a chronicle of male succession. Matthew incorporates four women in the genealogy, and all four of them were far from Israel’s ideal of purity – whether moral or racial.

The first mentioned is Tamar, a Canaanite woman who had sexual relations with her father-in-law. The second is Rahab, a prostitute and a pagan Canaanite. The third is Ruth, a woman of seemingly good character but another pagan, a Moabite. And at last Bathsheba, named in the list

as “the wife of Uriah,” the Hittite. Bathsheba, the one who committed adultery with King David. Four women mentioned in the list, at least three who had character that was short of exemplary. Then I thought, it’s easy to pick on the women, but in all the names of the men in Jesus’ genealogy, the good majority were far from exemplary and many were out right bad. Proof that God can use all kinds of people to fulfill His purposes and that He calls people from many different backgrounds and many walks of life.

Our person today is Joseph, he who was betrothed to Mary. Joseph seems to get the raw deal in the Christmas story. What’s Joseph going to get out of all of this? Zechariah and Elizabeth get a son out of it, a long-awaited child. Mary was able to give birth, not just to any child, but to the Son of God! Joseph is called to give up everything – his reputation as a man and a faithful Jew, his standing in the community, his ability to stay in one place, all to protect Mary and the baby to come. How long do you think it took Mary to tell Joseph what was about to happen, that the angel Gabriel had appeared to her and that through the Holy Spirit she was going to give birth to a Son? Did she tell him and then go off to visit her cousin Elizabeth? Or did she wait until she got back? //And after she told him, while he was making plans to divorce her quietly, was it just her reputation he was worried about or was it his own as well?

The right and just thing to do was to divorce her. That was what would have been expected from all the other good, faithful Jews. Not only was Joseph trying to protect Mary, he was also trying to protect himself. A quiet divorce would protect his righteousness under the law, his reputation in the community and still allow others to see him as compassionate. It seemed like the only right and sensible thing to do. How long was it between when Mary told him, between when he started making plans to divorce her quietly, and the angel showed up in his dream one night?

²⁰ *As he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

²³ *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).*

Matthew 1:20-23

Joseph, who thought he had much to lose if he didn’t divorce the young woman he was betrothed to, was about to discover how much he had to gain by accepting God’s plan to entrust him with the care and protection of Mary, and the son she was about to give birth to. And it’s all in the names. Actually two names given in Matthew’s account. For Jewish people back in the day naming the child was very important. It pointed to the child’s destiny. Jesus was a very popular name for Jewish boys in the first century. The name “Jesus,” in Hebrew is the same as “Joshua” or simply “Yeshua.” Joshua was an important name in Israelite history because that name reminded the Jewish people of the one who led the Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. The gospel writer Matthew who was writing his gospel mostly for the Jewish audience, sees Jesus as the one who will complete what the law of Moses pointed to, but in of itself could not complete. Yeshua, Jesus, will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, death, the power of Satan, and hell. That is the meaning of the name Jesus, Joshua, Yeshua – “God saves!”

While Jesus was a popular name that many boys were given in the day, no parent in their right mind would give their son the name Immanuel. It carried too much pressure and too much expectation. It would be like naming your child: “Messiah.” The name Immanuel means “God with us.” Matthew wants his gospel readers to know that Jesus’ coming is all about the fulfillment of a long awaited prophecy when God would not only send a Savior, but that Savior would be God himself coming to earth.

Matthew wants to make the point so clear that he begins and ends his gospel with it. Immanuel – “God with us” – is found in the first chapter of Matthew and it is conveyed in the very last words of his gospel when Jesus tells his disciples, “*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:20)

The concept of God being with his people was deeply rooted in the mind of a Jewish person. Using those two names, Jesus and Messiah, to refer to the child who was to be born to Mary and Joseph, would not have gone unnoticed by most of the Jewish people of the day. They would have thought back to the words of Moses when he knew his life on earth was going to come to an end and that he would not be able to lead them into the Promised Land. It was Joshua who was going to lead them. But it wasn’t just Joshua, it was also God himself who would go with them. “Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6).

Those were the two things that the Jewish people were expecting in their coming Messiah: A God who would save them and a God who would be with them.

Through God coming to earth in the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God is present with His people. God doesn’t intervene from a distance, he is always active, sometimes in the most unexpected ways. Perhaps there is a situation that you are going through this Christmas season that desperately needs God’s intervention in an unexpected way?

- Perhaps you or someone you love is in desperate need of healing.
- Perhaps you have a desperate need for forgiveness or the ability to forgive someone else.
- Perhaps you have some other desperate need to be filled.

God knows exactly where you are at and what your desperate need is. But He wants you to call on His name, to seek, to ask, and keep on asking Him to show up in your life. That’s what the season of Advent is all about. Will you be prepared, will you be ready for Him if He does? Chances are good that if He does it might be in a different way than you expected. And He might expect something from you that you never imagined.

That’s what happened to Joseph. He probably asked God to help him out of the situation he found himself in. Little did he know that God was already in it. Joseph was given his Call of Christmas through an angel in a dream. The angel conveyed that he was not only to take Mary as his wife, but he was also going to be given a son to raise (that who was not really his own).

He was given the responsibility and a call to protect them both. What did Joseph get out of taking Jesus as his own? The same thing we all get out of accepting Jesus as our own. We get a Savior and we get God with us. It doesn't get any better than that. What a call! What was Joseph's response?

²⁴ *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,* ²⁵ *but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

Matthew 1:24-25 (NIV)

Joseph's response was immediate obedience. The dream that the Lord had given Joseph as he slept and the angelic call resulted in immediate action. The betrothed season came to an abrupt end, he took Mary as his wife and they did not consummate their marriage (that which might have cast the virginal birth into doubt), until after Jesus was born. The fact that the gospels and the other writings of the New Testament go on to state in multiple places that Jesus had siblings lets us know that Mary and Joseph did not remain abstinent after Jesus was born (as some have suggested). They were a normal married couple with an abnormal call on their lives: to be the parents of God in the flesh.

Mary did the best she could. So did Joseph! Joseph's call was to protect and provide for his wife and her newborn son. They were his responsibility. That pattern of God's sovereign intervention, followed by Joseph's obedient response, begun by the angel speaking to him in his dream to take Mary as his wife, would be repeated, again and again. After the baby is born the angel would tell him to take him and Mary to Egypt to keep Jesus safe from King Herod, then the angel would tell him to return to Nazareth. Each time Joseph responded without hesitation.

While Mary is credited with her response, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," Joseph's response is equally commendable. He could have said, "it's only a dream." He could have walked away, done what others viewed as the right and just thing to do. But God communicated it in a way that gave him courageous faith and a call to protect this woman and the child that would change the world. He didn't forget this dream when he awoke. It was unforgettable and life changing.

John MacArthur says that "such a call to protect and a responsibility from God to Joseph should indicate the depth of his godliness and character." Think about it, surely God would not entrust His own Son into a family where the father was not totally committed and faithful to Him. While we don't know very much about Joseph other than the dreams and his obedient response, we do get a glimpse of his faithfulness. He and his wife presented their baby Jesus in the temple to be dedicated back to God at the required time. And when Jesus was twelve it says that, "his parents took Him to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover, that which they did every year."

How at the age of twelve did the human Jesus know the Scriptures so good? I think much can be attributed to his parents, both Mary and Joseph.

And then we don't hear anything about Joseph after that. All we can do is assume that he died sometime between when Jesus was twelve years old and the beginning of Jesus' ministry at about age twenty-nine. It was probably closer to the earlier date which wouldn't have been that unusual in the day. Average life expectancies were not that great, especially for men and Joseph was probably quite a bit older than Mary.

Joseph followed the others early on in the first “Call of Christmas.” Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary, he too was a man of exemplary character. He too was a faithful servant of God. He responded to the Call from God to protect Mary and Jesus who were entrusted to his care, even when it threatened his reputation and went against what was considered right and just.

So, who are the Joseph’s of today?

- Joseph’s of today are the husbands and wives who have been able to forgive and have remained married after an adulterous affair by their spouse?
- Joseph’s of today are the ones who take back their children, the prodigal son’s and daughter’s who have wandered off, sometimes over and over again.
- Joseph’s of today are all the men and women who accept the Call from God to protect and raise children that are not their own – whether it as foster parents or through adoption.
- Joseph’s of today are those men who accept the responsibility of loving and protecting their wife and raising their children in the faith as the top priorities in their life.

Really, there are lots of Joseph’s among us today.

Joseph’s of today are those men who respond obediently to the word of God. The stories in the Old Testament about God speaking directly to certain people – like Noah, Abraham & Moses, and in the New Testament through angels to Zechariah, Mary & Joseph and some of the others to come in the story of the first Christmas, just doesn’t happen to most of us today. That’s not how God has chosen to speak to us today. God’s call to us today comes through the written word, with the help of his Holy Spirit and his continued presence among us as Emmanuel.

In what way is God calling you this Christmas season and are you hesitating because of fear of rejection by other people, or it doesn’t seem right and just? Will you answer the call as faithfully and obediently as Joseph did?