

“Christmas Movements”
Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

This is a traditional Christmas passage, describing the birth of Jesus through Joseph’s eyes. Luke’s more well-known account describes the same event through Mary’s eyes. One of the features of good stories is the movement of plot. If I say, “The man and his wife were racing down the shoulder of the road at rush hour,” you have a statement, but not a story. But we would have a story with a plot if we gave some more information. “After laboring at home with her second pregnancy, the husband and wife ended up waiting too long to head to the hospital, and now she was in the transition stage of labor. Would they make it to the hospital in time, or would the husband have to deliver the baby on the side of the road?” In this context, the statement about the husband and wife racing down the shoulder of the highway becomes part of a story with movement and plot. By the way, this happens to be the story of the birth of our second child.

The story of Jesus’ birth is marked by this kind of movement and plot. Movement can be either action oriented or more internal to a character in the story. Both kinds appear in the Christmas story, but most of the movement of this passage is the internal kind. It tells us what is going on inside Joseph, as well as describing the movement inherent in Christianity. I note three different movements in this story.

I. From Disruption to Joyful Anticipation

Our story begins with some hard news for Joseph. **“When...Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit”** (v. 18). The last part of that sentence is something that we the readers are told, but a key fact Joseph is not told until later. All he knows is that his fiancé has turned up pregnant, and he’s not the father. The only conclusion he can draw, the same one any of us would draw in his circumstances, is that Mary has been unfaithful.

This news would have shaken Joseph significantly. You may notice that our Pew Bibles have a footnote for the word “betrothed” that reads “legally pledged to be married.” Engagements in this culture were different from ours, being much more like a marriage in every way except the couple continues to live separately and does not have sexual relations. That’s why our text speaks of Joseph considering a divorce, and why Mary’s pregnancy would be considered clear evidence of adultery. All this happened when Joseph was likely still a very

young man. It was common practice in this day for Jewish men to marry sometime between 18 and 20 years of age, after they had acquired a skill and had saved some money. Women usually married a bit younger, typically not long after going through puberty. So this news of Mary's pregnancy would have been a serious blow to the teenage Joseph. The marriage he had dreamed of and has been planning for is not turning out at all the way he imagined it.

As Joseph gives consideration to what he should do, he has only two options open to him, and both involve divorce. He can divorce her quietly or publicly. Jewish law of this day did not allow the third option—to go ahead and take her as his wife. The law of this day, not the law of the Bible, demanded that a man divorce his wife if she was guilty of adultery. So out of consideration for Mary, Joseph wants to do this in a way that will mean minimal pain for Mary. So he decides to divorce her quietly.

Then his plans are disrupted again when the angel visits him. Plan A was to take Mary as his wife, and that plan has already been abandoned because of Mary's presumed adultery. Now Plan B, to divorce her quietly, must also be abandoned for Plan C which comes to him direct from God through the angel. **“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”** (v. 20). Mary has not committed adultery after all. As incredible as it may seem, God himself is the Father of this child through the impregnation of Mary by the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle's Creed says, Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” According to Jewish law, then, he would be free to proceed with a marriage, even if no one would believe him when he explained what the angel had told him.

Joseph will do what God has told him to do through the angel. He will take Mary to be his wife. God then announces that this baby will be special. Emotionally, Joseph has moved from the trauma of this disruptive and unwanted news of Mary's pregnancy, to the joyful anticipation of his firstborn son. This movement from disruption to joyful anticipation is the movement of God's kingdom breaking into this world. Neither Joseph nor Mary sought the disruptions brought to them by the birth of God's Son, but both accepted them and submitted themselves to God.

The kingdom of God breaks forth into our lives in the same way, with disruptions. These disruptions are normally some form of unwanted suffering: a job loss, a health crisis, a relational challenge, or any number of other tribulations. Our response to these disruptions needs to be the same as Joseph's response. We read, **“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him”** (v. 24). He submitted to God and trusted him. He let God write the script of his life instead of insisting that God submit to Joseph's script for his life.

Two applications occur to me in this, and the first one is a parenting application. The parents God chose for his beloved Son had both learned to submit to God. Mary, you may remember, was also noted for this. Luke recorded her response to God's word to her about the baby to be born to her through the Holy Spirit. **"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"** (Luke 1:38). Submission to God's will is a crucial part of good parenting. As a parent, you don't get to decide what your child will be. You don't get to decide their personality, their gifts, their likes and dislikes, their body type and countless other features. You also don't get to define their future. That's God's role. Your role is to submit to God's decision, love your child and train him or her to love and trust God.

A second application that occurs to me concerns how Joseph is such a good model of the kind of Christian we need today. In the entire New Testament, Joseph never speaks a single word. But he acts faithfully time and time again. His submission in this text will not be the last time his faithfulness will be reported. In the next chapter, we read that an angel appeared to him again and told him to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod. This young father again submitted to the will of God and embraced the life of a refugee far from home. Quiet Joseph, faithful Joseph speaks loudly to us today of the kind of people we need to be. God used this quiet, faithful man to change the world. In our noisy world where everyone is shouting loudly on the internet, television, or in personal conversation, we need men and women like Joseph, quietly submitting to God and being faithful to him.

II. From Shame to Covering

As Joseph was considering what he should do about Mary's pregnancy, before the angel appeared to him, we read that he was a just man who was **"unwilling to put her to shame"** (v. 19). Shame made an early appearance in the Old Testament, when we are told that Adam and Eve felt no shame prior to their sin. Here, it makes an early appearance in the New Testament, though man's natural state regarding shame has changed. In Genesis, Adam and Eve felt no shame in spite of the fact that they were naked and completely vulnerable. But here, Mary is susceptible to shame even though she has done nothing wrong. Her feeling of shame would come from the condemning judgments of her community.

What could Joseph do to reduce Mary's shame? Though he couldn't remove it entirely, he did what he could. What he could do was to divorce her quietly instead of publicly. A public divorce would communicate clearly that Mary was guilty of adultery, thus preserving Joseph's reputation in the community when it would be made clear that the child she carried was not his. A public divorce would also be to Joseph's financial advantage. By taking her to court in a public divorce, he could have laid claim to her dowry, the financial assets she

and her family brought to the marriage. He also would have been able to reclaim the bride price he had paid to Mary's family.

There was more he was willing to do. After the angel visited him to tell him that Mary was not guilty of adultery and that he should proceed with the marriage, Joseph did so. It is easy for us to miss the significance of this for Joseph. To take Mary as his wife would subject Joseph to the same shame from which he was trying to protect Mary. The community would now conclude that Joseph was the one to get Mary pregnant before the wedding. He wouldn't even have been able to counter this with the truth without increasing his shame. Imagine the response he would have received had he simply told the truth of the angel's message to him of Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit. "Joseph, we've heard excuses for sin before, but never such a bold tale as you are telling here."

Joseph was doing in small measure what his adoptive Son would do in large measure. He was taking shame upon himself in order to release others from shame. Though Jesus had done nothing wrong, he died by the most shameful death of crucifixion. The message of shame is clear: "You're not enough; you don't belong among the righteous." In a crucifixion, the criminal is lifted up for ridicule and condemnation by the community, sending those very messages of shame. That's what we all deserve, but what Jesus takes for us. As Paul says in Romans 8:1, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** Condemnation is another form of shame and judgment, and Jesus has released us from it. Now, God's word spoken over us is one of belonging and acceptance. **"You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by which we cry, 'Abba! Father!'"** (Romans 8:15).

An important application is suggested to us in Joseph's story. He was a just man who sought to minimize the shame of others, in his case his betrothed, Mary. Psychiatrist Curt Thompson has pointed out that shamed people shame others. But the opposite is also true. Those released from shame by Jesus are empowered to be like Joseph and release others from shame. Would others say of you that you release them from their shame, or that you add to their shame? We could all use some improvement in this, and the improvement comes from knowing Joseph's adoptive Son, the one who has released us from our shame by taking it upon himself.

III. From Abandonment to Intimate Connection

Though it is normally the right of a father to decide his child's name, that right would not be given to Joseph. He was, after all, not technically Jesus' father. To Jesus' heavenly Father belonged the right of naming his Son, and two names are given in this passage. Of Mary the angel said, **"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from**

their sins” (v. 21). The second name comes from the quote from Isaiah 7. **“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”** (v. 23).

“Jesus” is the New Testament form of the Hebrew name “Joshua.” It means “Jehovah helps.” Just as the Old Testament character by this name led Israel into the Promised Land, so Jesus leads us across the Jordan into our permanent home with God. The specific way Jesus helps us is to save us from our sins. That is our main problem that keeps us from the Promised Land of heaven, and Jesus comes to resolve that problem.

Why does God want us in the Promised Land with him? Because his name is “Immanuel,” God with us. This addresses our fear of abandonment, a fear residing deep within us all. The big story of the Bible began with this theme of “God with us,” as Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden. Because of their sin, though, they were banished from paradise. Ever since, God has been working to open again the way back to paradise. It is in Jesus that it is finally accomplished.

This little pronoun “with” is profound. God *with* us. If Jesus is with me always, and also with you, then I am with you too and you with me. This quiets our fear of abandonment and speaks to the longing within us all for community and fellowship. Jesus comes to restore us both with him and with all those loved ones who also love Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

The miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus is so appropriate to Christmas. It speaks of the initiative of God to come into this world to remove sadness, shame, and isolation. It also speaks of the way Jesus comes into our lives, no less miraculously than the Holy Spirit’s conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin. For all who have received this great gift of salvation through Jesus, let us give thanks for this immeasurably great gift. For all those who have not yet done so, God is speaking to you today in a way no less real than the angel spoke to Joseph. Jesus has come, and to all who receive him, he gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12). I invite you to receive him and the miracle of new life he brings.