

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

18 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. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## **Sermon: O Holy Night by Pastor Jenn**

We've been taking a journey through these advent weeks. A journey to learn more about Israel and the hope they held onto through generations. A journey to meet Mary and the peace she received in saying yes to God's will. A journey to meet Elizabeth and Zechariah and the joy they had from having a child in their old age, who would prepare the way for the Lord. Today we are going to talk about love as we get to know Joseph.

There is limited scripture about him. We only read of his name when Jesus is in the womb, then as a baby, and then again when he is 12 and goes to the synagogue. By the time Jesus begins his ministry, Joseph is deceased. But Joseph is important because of his portrayal of his faith, his belief in God and God's works in his life, the life of Mary, and the life of this holy child. A faith he conveyed when he took this call on.

Here is the background to Joseph that we know of. He was from Bethlehem and Bethlehem has its own significance for many reasons: 1) Bethlehem is the setting for the Book of Ruth 2) Ruth's great grandson was David, who was of Bethlehem and upon his reign Bethlehem became known as the city of David. Joseph was a descendent of David as expressed in the genealogy of Jesus expressed in Matthew 1: 16 and he lived in this *little town* as the song says, that probably had around 500-1,000 people living there. Bethlehem's name means House of Bread, as it housed farmers who grew wheat and barley and bakers who would bake bread and probably then delivered to customers in Jerusalem, which was only a 2 hour walk. There were also craftsmen and carpenters, like Joseph. It was a town of working class people. So taking into consideration all that information about his hometown, about his connection to King David, and recognizing he was a carpenter, we can assume Joseph was humble, probably hard working, and would take his faith and his work seriously.

Now while he lived and worked in Bethlehem, Mary lived in Nazareth. It's important to realize the difference between the two was a 9-day walking hike. More than likely the marriage was arranged between their families. When a marriage was arranged, there was a formal legal binding ceremony, then once the man had built a home for his wife, there would be the formal wedding ceremony. But Joseph and Mary hadn't gotten that far in their relationship. They probably did not see each other since the legal ceremony that announced their engagement. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth is said to have lived in Ein Karem, which was only 4 miles from Bethlehem. Remember with me how after Mary discovers she will have Jesus, she travels to visit Elizabeth and stays with her 3 months. During that visit, Joseph probably went to check on Mary and that was how he discovered she was with child.

Imagine how you would feel to find your fiancé to be with child and you know the child is not yours? But add in the fact that if he told others Mary was pregnant with another person's child, Mary would be put to death. Mary's life was in Joseph's hands. Joseph was hurt but did not want to see Mary die. So he would break off the engagement and shortly after that people would know Mary was pregnant and naturally assume Joseph to be the father because he had gone to visit her at Elizabeth's. The shame would be upon him. Mary's life would be spared and she would have the pity of her family. Joseph was willing to take all this on to protect Mary, he was a "righteous man" as the text says. And righteousness here is not in obeying the law, righteousness is having compassion, mercy, and love. Love to do the right thing.

For just as Joseph had planned to quietly dismiss Mary the angel appears to Joseph and says, '*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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*' God knew the heart of Joseph, and God knew Joseph as a man whose love would help to pave the way for a holy night, a night

that would change the world and continues to do so to this day. And when Joseph awoke, he knew what this was, it was a great act of love that he and world were to receive from God. *So,* <sup>24</sup>*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,* <sup>25</sup>*but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.* The name Jesus means “God saves” and Joseph knew God’s act of salvation was a great act of love. I like the way 1 John writes about it: 1John 4: 9-10

<sup>9</sup>God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Christmas is love in action, and you and I are called to carry that action along. John continues, 1 John 4:11-12<sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Each and every day God needs us to put God’s love into action. And in this season of Advent it may be in a variety of ways. From loving our spouse without criticism but encouragement. To loving our children unconditionally. To helping a neighbor get through the holidays by cleaning her driveway, cooking her a meal, empowering her to give gifts her children hope for. When we, like Joseph, stop to receive the love of God that we then put into action for others, we let that love shine, and we celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

In 1847 Placide Cappeau was a wine merchant in his little hometown in France. But he also liked to write poetry. One day the local parish priest, whom Placide did not see that often, asked him to write a Christmas poem for his Christmas Eve service. Placide took on the request and penned a poem based on the idea of being present at the night of Christ’s birth. But the poem turned into a hymn in fact he titled it “Canticle of Noel” which means “A Hymn of Christmas” and decided it should be put to music. So Placide called upon his friend, Adolphe Charles Adams for help. Adams was a well known musician at the time, composing operas and ballets for London, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. But he had never been asked to write music to something that would challenge him in a deep way. You see Adams was Jewish. The poem represented a holiday he didn’t celebrate for a man Adams did not consider the Son of God. Still Adams was moved by his friendship with Placide and wrote the music to the poem that would be performed 3 weeks later on Christmas Eve. Right away the song was openly received. So much so that the song found it’s way to various Catholic churches in France. That is until it was discovered that Placide walked away from the church and became a Socialist and it was discovered that Adams was Jewish. The church denounced the song-meaning they considered in wrong in the eyes of the Church because of it’s creators. But the French people continued to sing it.

In fact Legend has it that on Christmas Eve 1871 in the midst of fierce fighting between the armies of Germany and France during the Franco-Prussian War, a French soldier jumped out of a muddy trench with no weapon in his hand and he lifted his eyes to heaven and began to sing the Canticle of Christmas, later titled “O Holy Night”. *O holy night! The stars are brightly shining, It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'Til He appear'd and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. Fall on your knees! O hear the angels' voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born; O night divine, O night, O night Divine.*

By the last verse both sides of the armies were quiet and called a truce for the next 24 hours, observing a temporary peace in honor of Christmas day. *Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother; And in His name all oppression shall cease. Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, Let all within us praise His holy name. Christ is the Lord! O praise His Name forever, His power and glory evermore proclaim. His power and glory evermore proclaim.*

You see those army men recognized something the authors of the song recognized too, even if they were not public believers, that is Christmas has a divine quality of righteousness and mercy. Christmas brings the law of love and the gospel of peace.

As the journey to the manger continues this Advent season, may the holiness of this event lead you to receive the Christ child and all he brings to help the weary soul rejoice. Further may those present at the event, including Joseph, inspire you to devote yourself to the work of God that will bring hope, peace, joy, and love to your life and to this world.

Let’s pray: Lord as we prepare for this holy event of the birth of your Son, help us to continue to sing songs in our hearts and with our voices that proclaim the divine quality of power and glory that can change the world. Help us be holy in your name. Amen.