

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 fulfill 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.

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 7:10-16

pg. 646 OT

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

### ***“A Counter Cultural Vision”***

I saw a nativity painting this year that may now be one of my favorites. It depicts the holy family in the stable, but Mary isn't leaning over the manger looking adoringly at baby Jesus or even cradling him in her arms, as I'm sure she did. No, Mary is in the background, sleeping, a bit disheveled and exhausted, and Joseph is standing in the foreground, holding the newborn, a little awkwardly, tending to his needs. I like it because I can imagine that that's how it was, and because it gives Joseph a little credit, which he deserves. He gets really only a mention in Luke and only a few fleeting sentences in Matthew's gospel. Many people know what they know about Joseph from the carol that Peter, Paul and Mary made so famous, *“Joseph was an Old Man, an Old Man was He.”*

NO, Matthew does not say much about Joseph. In fact, Matthew's account of the birth story is short, but what Matthew chooses to say about Joseph is important. He writes, *“Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”* Being a *“righteous”* man is a high compliment, because Matthew, of the 4 Gospel writers, roots his words deeply in the Jewish faith and tradition. He locates Jesus securely within the Abrahamic line and within the promises made to the people, Israel, within their hopes and yearnings.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, as a righteous man, the reader is expected to know that Joseph would be obedient to the Law. He chose to divorce Mary, his fiancé, his betrothed, his promised, when he learned that she was *“with child”*. However, what Joseph did that was not required, what was remarkable, was to divorce Mary quietly, to simply end their engagement, and send her back to her family instead of publicly humiliating her and having her stoned, as he very well could have. You see, in Bible times, the betrothal was a legally binding contract, lasting 1 year's time, wherein a couple was considered as married but not yet living together. Breaking that contract, turning up pregnant, could only have meant Mary's unfaithfulness to him and to the contract. Torah-obeying Joseph, while having his

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon. *“Disrupted by Jesus”*. <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9830/december-22-2019-disrupted-by-jesus>. (accessed 12/19/19).

heart broken and dreams of being a future couple shattered, chose to do rightly, but he did it without fuming indignation and scandal. He did it with mercy toward Mary and her family.

Already, it seems that we're seeing that Joseph had some kind of inner call, some urging to follow different rules when needed, to not be trapped in a world wherein the convention and expectation encouraged callousness, dismissal, violence. Already, Joseph was hearing the invitation to live a counter cultural life where love and patience and protection and mercy spoke louder than any other voice.<sup>2</sup>

Then, to help him completely embrace the divine nature of the call inside of him, God sent an angel to intrude into one of Joseph's dreams and do what I've heard called the "heavy lifting". An angel calmed him and oriented him fully to God's intentions. An angel helped him trust that his dreams for his family's future would come to be, but in a different way, a much bigger way, God's way. An angel told him that the child that Mary was carrying was of the Holy Spirit. The baby was, in fact, none other than the long-awaited Messiah. Joseph was told to name the baby, "Jesus", which means Deliverer, to marry his mother, and thereby protect her and Jesus from further public scrutiny.

We aren't told much more about Joseph, but we do know that he took Jesus as his own, and that he continued to listen and follow God's voice. We know this because he soon heeded a warning given him in another dream...that his child was in mortal danger and that he needed take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt, as refugees. We can only surmise, but I think it a good guess, that the love that Jesus talked about as he grew and entered his ministry reflected somewhat the love in the home that he was raised in. It was the love that he stood for, the love he died for, the love of God and neighbor. And it seems reasonable that the kind of rule-changing, deep-seeing love, the kind of patient, quiet, healing, godly love which was strong enough to grasp for something different and undeterred by conventions and expectations must have been something he witnessed in his earthly father, Joseph...in his earthly father whose

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<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Grant. "Expecting Christmas" [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200379c/expecting\\_christmas](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200379c/expecting_christmas). (accessed 12/19/19).

experiences with the divine around that very first Christmas cemented an inner call which had first spoken to him “*to dismiss her quietly.*”

You know, our Christmases each year invite us, like Joseph, to let go of much of our culture’s expectations of us, to renew a countercultural vision. We are called to let God’s peace gradually warm our souls which may be chilled from the hustle and bustle of the season, which may have been numbed by the “to do” lists thrust upon us, which may have become hardened to the endless stories of pain and suffering in the news, which may be hurt and confused due to the difficult circumstances we find our own selves in. Christmas calls us each year to let God warm our souls and to do rightly, to:

- Awaken our senses of compassion and mercy to feed the hungry, care for the sick, clothe the naked, and welcome all, especially those who have no place to lay their heads.
- Find our voices to speak truthfully, especially on behalf of those who have no voice, the poor, the weak, the young, the very old, the vulnerable.
- Seek again a posture of prayer for those who persecute us,
- Renew our resolve to stand against bullying and threatening behaviors whether they occur on the school playground, the workplace, social media or the home.

Christmas calls us to let God warm our souls once again, to put away the cynicism, suspicion and dismay that has crept in over the year and which may be weighing heavy upon us, and instead be freed for new expectations, to look with expectant hope for the new world that is beginning to dawn. Yes, the countercultural vision of righteous Joseph, calls us to remember the most important thing, what Christmas is about... the capacity to love and be loved.<sup>3</sup>

Brothers and sisters, it takes some courage to do this. It does. The further away that we have wandered, the more chilled our hearts and souls have become, the more distant that the circumstances of life have pushed us, the harder it is. Many of you, may really be struggling this holiday season. I know. It can be a hard time amidst all the celebration. However, I want to suggest something...I want to suggest as have some other commentators that for Joseph, one

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<sup>3</sup>Maxwell Grant. “*Expecting Christmas*” .

word, may have made all the difference. One word gave him the strength to affirm the call inside of him and to live a life with a godly vision, as an example for his little son.<sup>4</sup> And that word, uttered by an angel, was “*Emmanuel*,” which means “God is with us.” And the angel said, “*All this has taken 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.”*”

Yes, friends, God is with us. God was with Joseph and God is with you and me....always and everywhere. And if God is with us, then we need never be afraid or think ourselves too weak to take on what the Christmas call awakens in us. The small voice from the Bethlehem manger calls us, but he is also the very One who created the cosmos with a word and has sent poets and prophets, manna and messengers, fires and flood, and then finally came himself as flesh and blood to share our lot, to be with us and for us so that we might know how very, very, very much he loves us.<sup>5</sup>

So, this year and in the year to come, I invite you to listen for the Christmas call in your heart and soul, remember that you are never alone, let yourself be freed for new expectations, and look with expectant hope for the new world that is beginning to dawn. “*O Come to us; abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*”

Merry Christmas. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Renninger. “*God’s Dream for You*”. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Michael-Renninger-Birth-of-Jesus.pdf>. (accessed 12/20/19).

<sup>5</sup> Deon Johnson. “*A Daring Plan*”. <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/daring-plan-advent-4-december-22-2019>. (accessed 12/20/19).