

Since Joseph “had a mind to divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1:19), we may assume that he and Mary were in phase two: the betrothal stage. The word “quietly” emphasizes the fact that Joseph was a good, decent guy. Although Joseph was “faithful to the law,” which required he and Mary to separate due to any infidelity, Joseph cared enough about Mary to “not want to expose her to public disgrace” (Matthew 1:19). Either way Joseph was in a real pickle, an ethical and moral conundrum. What should he do? How best to honor his commitment to God’s law and his commitment to Mary?

While Joseph considered his options, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying “Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21). Joseph was understandably troubled by Mary’s mysterious pregnancy, unsure of their future together, and confused as to the right course of action. Though he had decided to divorce Mary quietly, Joseph remained uncomfortable with that decision.

To relieve Joseph’s concerns, the angel makes several statements. First, the angel addresses Joseph as “son of David,” a reference to Joseph’s ancestor King David. This title alerted Joseph that the angel’s message would be something momentous. God promised the people of Israel a Messiah who would be of David’s house and who would come to save God’s people.

Then the angel informs Joseph that the child was truly conceived by the Holy Spirit. Although he offers no explanation as to *how* this happened (Luke tells us God’s Spirit “overshadowed” Mary, v. 1:35), the angel wants Joseph to know that there is nothing improper here. Joseph should not be worried about any scandal surrounding Mary’s pregnancy.

The angel instructs Joseph to name the child Jesus. This was a common name at the time; the historian Josephus mentions 12 different men named Jesus in his writings. Having Joseph name the child, however, is significant as it was customary for the child’s father to bestow the name on the first child born. Here, the angel

involves Joseph in the life of this child in a deeply meaningful way. Joseph will be Jesus’ human father, responsible for his care and upbringing. Jesus will be as much Joseph’s son as he is the Son of God.

Finally, the angel divulges the purpose of this pregnancy: Jesus will save his people from their sins. Salvation from sin is a vital element of Hebrew tradition and an essential task of the promised Messiah (see Isaiah 53; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-31). The angel’s words are a clue that Jesus would be the Messiah come to liberate “His people” from their sins. What’s more, Jesus would not just save the Jewish people, the people descended from Abraham, but Jesus would save all people who believed in Him – His people – from their sins.

Matthew sums this up using the words of the prophet Isaiah: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’ which means ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:22-23; Isaiah 7:14). This happened to Mary and to Joseph because God who promises, is faithful.

God is wholly committed to God’s people. God chose to come to us in physical, human form to be *Immanuel*, God with us. God added human nature to God’s divine nature, accepting our weaknesses, frailties, and dependencies to show God’s solidarity with humankind. God fully embraced our human experience to overcome our faults and offenses. God did this to show the compatibility between humanity and God, for we are truly made in God’s image. God did this so that we might go to God directly for help. As Charles Spurgeon put it: “Then, if Jesus Christ be ‘God with us,’ let us come to God without any question or hesitancy. Whoever you may be you need no priest or intercessor to introduce you to God, for God has introduced himself to you.” Jesus. Immanuel. God with us.

Since God had no issue committing to us, Joseph decided he had no issue in committing to Mary or committing to God’s plan for Joseph’s life. “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife” (Matthew 1:24). Joseph did not doubt or waver; he understood the truth of the angel’s message and the importance of this child for the world. When

the child was born, Joseph named him Jesus, and we testify that this Jesus did go on to save His people. His commitment to us led to the cross, through the grave, and into new life again!

Sadly, our modern, enlightened world has some serious commitment issues when it comes to Jesus. Where Jesus committed his whole self to us, we only commit to selfish pursuits. Where Jesus asks us to commit to serving one another, we only commit to those things which benefit us directly. Where Jesus invites us to share as we care for our neighbor, we only commit to hoarding what we think we need. Where Jesus challenges us seek God's righteousness and God's Heavenly Kingdom first, we only commit to creating our personal kingdoms on earth.

The Psalmist urges: "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in [God] and [God] will do this: [God] will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun" (Psalm 37:5-6). Advent is the time to examine our lives and to re God's commit our way to the Lord who in Jesus Christ is fully committed to us. As Joseph discovered, the plan we are committed to may not be the plan God has in mind for us. Better to commit to God who is already "all in" on our account.

Prayer: Holy and loving God, we have dwelt in darkness and preferred it to the light; we have been proud of our accomplishments and despaired over our shortcomings. Smooth down the mountains of our pride and lift up the valleys of our doubts. Open a path in the wilderness of our lives that we might find our way to you again. Refine us and prepare us once again for life in your kingdom. In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Source: "20 Percent of All Weddings Are Called Off. Here's Why" Diana Bruk. May 15, 2018. <https://bestlifeonline.com/engagements-called-off-break-up-stories/>

A Fear of Commitment

Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 1:18-25

There is a common plot twist in movies which involves a bride or groom bailing on their wedding day, often to pursue someone else. I always thought this plot device was simply used for dramatic effect, but a recent survey suggests otherwise. According to a poll of 1,000 people between ages of 20 and 60 across the United States, a whopping 20 percent of all engagements are called off before the wedding. The reasons for these breakups vary. Some people claim that their partner was more in love with the idea of marriage than they were with them. Some have commitment issues. Other breakups happen because of poor communication skills, low self-awareness by one partner, not enough time spent together, and pressure from friends and family. One reason that did not appear in the survey: she is having someone else's baby.

Which leads me into our text today. Joseph was engaged to Mary, "but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). No doubt that raised some serious questions for Joseph. Was Mary cheating on him? Was Mary delusional or did the Holy Spirit really do this? What would his parents and friends and neighbors think? What should Joseph do now: break up with Mary or try to work it out? Joseph is faced with some serious commitment issues with some serious legal consequences.

Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married. Marriage in the ancient Jewish world had three phases. Phase one was the *engagement*, often arranged by parents when children were young. Phase two was the *betrothal* which made the engagement legally binding. During the betrothal period, the couple would be considered "husband and wife," and they lived together. The only way to cancel a betrothal was with a legal divorce. Phase three was the marriage ceremony, which occurred about one year after the betrothal.