

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

December 19, 2021

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series:

The Redemptive Disruption of Jesus' Birth

Joseph - and the Birth of Jesus

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Study #2

Introduction: The "other" birth story...

There are two birth narratives of Jesus in the New Testament. One is found in Luke, the other is in Matthew.

Luke takes over twenty-five hundred words and most of two chapters to tell the story. Matthew's telling takes eight verses.

Jeff's message last Sunday was from Luke. He told about an elderly, priestly couple, a young virgin,¹ and shepherds. Matthew's account, which we'll see today, is Joseph-centric. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from a Joseph's-eye view.

By the time we get to the birth story, Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, has already given us Jesus' genealogy. (1:1-17)

Beginning with the father of the Jews, Abraham, he traced Jesus' family tree forward to Joseph, ***[Matthew 1:16] the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.***

Matthew then moves straight from the genealogy to His birth.

¹ In Luke, Mary is the main focus. The angel, Gabriel, appears to her. She visits Elizabeth. She makes a speech. She welcomes the shepherds, and she treasures all that happened in her heart.

We'll hear nothing about some of the more common staples of Christmas - nothing about a trip to Bethlehem or an overcrowded inn or a manger.

The very first words set the stage for what is to come.

DISRUPTION (v. 18)

A Picture-Perfect Engagement

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ² was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph...

Engagement/Betrothal in first century Israel

As there is for us, today, in the first century there was a period of time between single life and married life known as "betrothal" or "engagement."

Today, the "engagement period" is that special time reserved for frantic planning, hectic scheduling, nervous waiting, and high tension - perfect preparation for a relaxing wedding and refreshing honeymoon.

In the first century, engagement / betrothal was different.

A Jewish young man who wanted to marry a young woman would approach his own father and ask him to approach the father of the woman he wanted to marry.

The two fathers would talk and would come to an agreement about the two young people's marriage and the deal would be sealed with a betrothal ceremony. (The betrothal ceremony normally took place in the middle of the day in the middle of the week - Wednesday.)

The betrothal ceremony

² Note that in the original Greek the reference to Jesus in verse one (***Jesus the Messiah***) and in verse eighteen (***Jesus Christ***) are identical.

At the ceremony, the father of the bride and the father of the groom would sign a written contract in the presence of the synagogue scribes. The two families would exchange gifts with each other - in the case of Joseph and Mary, likely humble gifts.

Then, the priest would give his blessing:
*“Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
 Who has sanctified us by His Commandments.
 Blessed art Thou,
 Who sanctifies Israel by betrothal.”*

After the blessing, the future bride and groom would share a cup of wine, and it was official. They were engaged!

Not married. Engaged. They would not live together as husband and wife for a full year. That year would be filled with preparations for married life.

The betrothed life

Besides preparing for the actual wedding, the future husband had to prepare a place for him and his bride to live, while the future wife would collect things necessary for the home.

In the first century, to be engaged to be married was serious. It was a much more serious commitment than an engagement is today.

The man and woman were pledged to each other and to break a betrothal was tantamount to divorce.

Mary and Joseph are betrothed

And this is the relationship of Mary and Joseph as the story begins.

And, yes, there is much that we don't know that we would love to know. Was this relationship arranged by parents? Did Mary and Joseph love each other?

And how old were they? We assume that they were young (some traditions say that Joseph was much older than Mary), but the Bible gives us no clues.

What is clear is that their relationship was considered settled in the community. They had taken vows, and they would be married.

But, during engagement, there was no sexual intimacy. Given that, the words that follow are...complicating.

An Unexpected Pregnancy

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant...

Matthew provides two important pieces of news. Mary is pregnant AND she is pregnant *before* she and Joseph have become husband and wife.

Living in the culture in which we do, it is a challenge for us to grasp the seriousness of this bit of news. But in the context in which it was written - a small, Jewish village two thousand years ago - it would have been big news.

Social mores and expectations in our culture are very different than they were in first century Israel.

Now, of course, here at our church, we abide by the Bible's teachings. We guide the unmarried to abstain from sexual intimacy.

And, of course, when there is a pregnancy outside of marriage, we affirm the value of the life in the womb. We love and care for the expectant mother and to the father. We help them grow as disciples of Jesus.

But in the first century village of Nazareth, there would not have been that level of acceptance. Unmarried sexual intimacy was taboo and out-of-marriage pregnancies brought dishonor to the couple and to the families.

Keep all of this in mind as we read this story.³ Keep in mind, too, that Mary was found to be with child during the time when she was engaged to Joseph.

An easy to jump to assumption is that Joseph is the father. But Matthew is clear that Mary was pregnant *“before they came together.”*

Joseph was not the father. There was someone else.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Something has happened that will disrupt Mary’s and Joseph’s well laid out Plan A for their lives. And the thing that has happened is holy. It is the most outrageous miracle in history.

Nowhere does Matthew try to get biological. He doesn’t explain. He simply affirms.

He knows that we know all about the birds and the bees. He does, too. We understand that this sort of thing - a virgin pregnancy - doesn’t happen. Matthew and his audience “got it” too.

But the Bible tells us that there was no human father involved in the conception of the Baby in Mary’s womb.

God the Holy Spirit was involved in this conception in a way in which He has never been involved in the conception of any other baby.

The story of Mary’s Baby - Jesus - that we read through the rest of Matthew’s book tells us of miracles of healing, nature miracles, exorcisms, and even resurrection from the dead.

³ In a first century Jewish village, most families shared a very close-knit communal style living arrangement. The discovery of Mary’s condition could certainly have been made at home, likely by Mary’s mother.

We accept the possibility of all those miracles against the backdrop of what we see here.

Joseph, Mary’s fiancée, was aware of her pregnancy before he was aware of God’s involvement.

Not surprisingly, Joseph came to a certain conclusion and made a very understandable “Plan B” to replace the Plan A of marrying Mary.

But Matthew doesn’t want you and me to think poorly of Joseph. He was a good guy.

DAMAGE CONTROL (v. 19)

[19] And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

Righteous Joseph

Joseph loved God. He organized his life around the commandments and the wisdom of God’s Word. He was serious about his life before God.

We would have recognized Joseph as an upstanding, loving, caring, righteous, moral man. But Joseph wasn’t stupid.

Sensible Joseph

He knew, but didn’t know

He noticed - as everybody else would have, too - that the body of his fiancée was changing. She was with child.

Matthew doesn’t tell us if Mary had explained the unique circumstance of her pregnancy or not.

She may have not told him. Or, she may have told him, and he didn’t believe her. My suspicion is that Mary told Joseph that she had not been unfaithful to him. But we don’t know that. The Bible doesn’t tell us that.

Unconvinced

But Joseph knew how these things happen. The wheels in his head were turning - *"She says she hasn't been with another man. But babies aren't born to virgins."*

Joseph was left with the only explanation possible: The woman with whom he had been planning to spend the rest of his life had been unfaithful to him. He certainly hadn't slept with Mary; some other man must have.

So, what will Joseph do? I mean, he did have options.⁴

Compassionate Joseph

According to the Law

The normal way to deal with something like this was by way of annulment. The engagement would be called off.

But, given the seriousness of betrothal/engagement in those days, the ending of engagement required that a formal document be drawn up, consisting of charges against Mary. They would then be legally "divorced."

Of course, had Joseph thought that he might have been the father, he might well have tried to hurry up the wedding date.

But he knew he wasn't the father, so that is not what he planned. He's going to end the engagement.

The charge against Mary - adultery - was typically brought in a very public way. The guilty party - Mary - would be exposed. Joseph was not willing to bring about this public shaming of Mary.

Plan B

⁴ Under Old Testament law, the death penalty was called for in cases of immorality. However, the Jews had lost the legal authority, under Roman rule, to carry out capital punishment.

For obvious reasons, he couldn't be Mary's husband. It would be shameful for him to marry her now that she was carrying another man's baby.⁵

But he would not go further than he had to go in divorcing her. He would keep things quiet. Private. Secret.

Maybe the plan involved freeing Mary up to leave town for the duration of the pregnancy to save face.

Mary would then be free of her vows to Joseph. She would be free to marry the father of her child. Joseph may have assumed that Mary loved that other man.

This - a quiet divorce - is Joseph's new Plan B.

I picture him exhausted from the planning, drained from the stress, and broken-hearted at the loss. He may have had in mind to go through with Plan B quickly.

But before he acted on his plan, he dropped off to sleep and had a dream. And this was *some dream*.

Many people have vivid dreams, regularly. Maybe you do. I don't. I rarely remember what I dream.

Joseph's dream was as vivid as could be. And this dream effectively killed his Plan B.

VISITATION (vv. 20-21)

Reassurance (v. 20)

"Joseph, son of David"

⁵ Matthew says that Joseph didn't want to disgrace Mary because he was a righteous man. Is it reading too much into the word "righteous" to say that Joseph also loved Mary?

[20] But when he had thought this over, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, SON OF DAVID..."

The name by which the angel addressed Joseph is what I want us to see here. He called Joseph by name, and then linked Joseph to his ancestors. It turns out that Joseph came from a very distinguished family, the tribe of Judah and the family line of King David.

Being a Jew, we knew he was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now we know that he came from the line of David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah - all of the great kings of Israel.⁶

He was the descendant of every king who had ever ruled over Israel from Jerusalem's throne.

No doubt, Joseph already knew all of this. The angel's greeting wasn't news. But I can easily imagine that Joseph wasn't often called, ***"Joseph, son of David."***

He was known as Joseph the carpenter, Joseph the fixer-upper, the handyman, not the descendant of kings.

But the angel has Joseph's undivided attention.

"Fear not"

[20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, DO NOT BE AFRAID TO TAKE MARY AS YOUR WIFE..."

We're used to reading that angels say, ***"Fear not!"*** It's evidently an unnerving thing to be in the presence of an angel of God.

But this angel is not telling Joseph, *"Relax, take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you."*

No, the angel's message is to urge Joseph to not be afraid to do something. Specifically, don't be afraid of marrying Mary. And there were lots of reasons why, for Joseph, marrying Mary would have been a fearful thing.

He could have feared...
...that he would be marrying a woman who loved another man.
...becoming a laughingstock in his community for marrying Mary after she had thrown him under the bus.
...the whole idea of raising another man's child.

The angel says, *"Joseph, you've got nothing to fear."*

Trust Mary; Trust God

[20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; FOR THE CHILD WHO HAS BEEN CONCEIVED IN HER IS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT."

Mary has not been unfaithful. Clearly and mysteriously, the Holy Spirit is the Agent responsible for the Life growing in her womb.

With that explanation, the angel obliterated Joseph's carefully thought out, perfectly reasonable Plan B, and replaced it with the original Plan A. Joseph will follow through with his plan to marry Mary.

The angel then cast a vision to Joseph for his role in the life of the Child Mary was carrying.

Vision-Casting

Joseph's mission

[21] "She will bear a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus..."

⁶ Per the genealogy. (Matthew 1:1-17)

Mary's pregnancy will go full-term. At the end of her pregnancy, she'll bear a Son. And Joseph's assignment, his calling, is to be right there by Mary's side.

He was completely uninvolved in the conception of this Child. He is to be completely involved in the life of this Child.

The angel has given Joseph a fatherly role here. Joseph will name the Child.

In Judaism, the father names the child. Joseph knew that this Baby wasn't his. But he will be the only human father Mary's Child will ever know.

It will be Joseph's job to teach this Child the ways of the world, life lessons, wisdom, a trade.

He will walk the streets of Nazareth with this Boy by his side. They'll sit together in the Nazareth synagogue on the Sabbath. He'll play with the Child, and he'll watch him grow to manhood.

Joseph will be the adoptive father to the Son of God. His name is Jesus.⁷ And there's just something about that Name.

The Child's mission

[21] "...for He will save His people from their sins."

The name is simply the Greek form of the name "Joshua" (or "Yeshua"), which means, "*Yahweh is salvation.*"

Then, Matthew tells us that all of this - Mary's conception and pregnancy,⁸ the Baby in her womb - was to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah foretold hundreds of years earlier.

[22] Now all this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: [23] "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN WILL CONCEIVE AND GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

Here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel we have one of the most concise and beautiful summaries of the mission of Mary's Child.

Nothing is said of a revived Jewish monarchy or about deliverance from Roman oppression. Nothing is said about political freedom or economic freedom.

This Child is uniquely "**God with us.**" Yep. We get that. Mary was pregnant with a Child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And because of who He IS, He will bring what nobody else could bring. He will bring freedom. Spiritual freedom from the penalty and the bondage of sin.

Joseph got to hear the message of Jesus' mission straight from the angel's lips.

So, Merry Christmas. And I'm really glad you're here today to sing great songs and to hear the wonderful story of Jesus' birth.

But if you are here and have never considered Jesus' mission and the purpose for which He was born, I hope and pray that you get this...

You may well have problems. We all do.

Your problems may be related to health or money or job or friends or family. And if you have problems in any or all these areas, I'm really sorry.

I'll pray for you in these. My dream is that our church family will be a supportive community for you in your time of need.

But the biggest problem any of us have ever had is that we have sinned, because sin separates us from God.

⁷ Jesus is one of a very few biblical characters named before birth, along with Isaac, Ishmael, Moses (so, the Rabbis, but he was actually named afterwards), Solomon, and Josiah. And, of course, John the Baptist.

⁸ Mary's pregnancy is a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

That's the bad news. Here is the good news.

Jesus has come. As John the Baptist said, He was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) When He died on the cross as a perfect sacrifice, Jesus suffered the penalty for all sin - yours, mine, and everyone else's - for all time. (That's atonement.)

Now, the wrath of God has been turned away from us (that's propitiation), and we can freely come to Him through faith in Jesus and receive the no-strings-attached gift of eternal life (that's justification).

Today, six days before the celebration of His birth, would be the best of all possible times for you to come to God through faith in Jesus.

When you believe in Him, He gives you the best gift you'll ever receive: LIFE, eternal and abundant!

That is God's invitation to you, today, right now.

Joseph now knows the mission of Mary's Baby. Watch his response to the mission the angel gave him.

COURAGE AND FAITH (vv. 24-25)

Upon waking from the most amazing dream of his life, Joseph did exactly what the angel told him he need not fear to do.

[24] And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, [25] but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he named Him Jesus.

He did not divorce Mary. He took her as his wife. He cared for her as lovingly as any husband cares for his wife, and he didn't touch her until Jesus was born.

Personally, I believe that Joseph's complete turnaround from a plan for annulment to a decision to take Mary as his wife is among the strongest evidence we have for the truth of the Incarnation.

How else are we to explain Joseph's abrupt change in his posture toward Mary, but that the unbelievable and incredible message to Joseph was believable and credible? It was all true.

The angel had told him, ***"Do not be afraid..."***

So, Joseph rejected fear. Faithfully and courageously, he followed God into a future he would have never chosen, but once embraced, would never regret.

He took Mary's Child under his wing as if he was His father - and named Him Jesus.

Conclusion:

Joseph's story is the story of a man who had a perfectly wonderful Plan A for his life.

He was gainfully employed. He was engaged to be married and was all set to raise a family and get on with his life.

When he got news about Mary's pregnancy, he put together a new plan. A noble Plan B that would spare Mary public disgrace, but that would allow both of them freedom from their vows.

What he would never have dreamed of doing, stay the course, and marry his pregnant fiancée, he did.

And he did it because God let him see how his extremely disrupted life plan was an integral part of God's ultimate, redemptive story.

It was as if God was saying, *"Joseph, I want you to see things the way I see things.*

"When you do, you'll see that the ridicule you'll get from your friends and neighbors, the scorn they will heap on you, the names they'll call you and Mary, will all be worth it.

“I’m going to bring out of your disruption something beautiful and redemptive. Joseph, and you have nothing to fear.”

This morning, we have seen Joseph’s story and we admire his courageous faith.

We are thoroughly impressed at how he accepted the disruption of his life plans to be a player in God’s redemptive work. And we are thankful for the role Joseph played in being a father figure during the formative years of the Lord Jesus.

We are inspired by the stories of others, today, who are accepting the disruption of their Plan A, by those who persecute them.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus around the world, like us, had dreams of comfortable lives, safety, and prosperity. Those dreams have been dashed by enemies of the Gospel.

And they are continuing to be faithful in hard places, shining for Jesus in dark places, glad to play their part in God’s redemptive story today.

And - MERRY CHRISTMAS! - we are ready to embrace the idea that following Jesus may result in great disruption.

We may or may not get a vivid dream. But we hear the words, **“Do not be afraid...”** and agree to eagerly go wherever He leads.

We will share the love of Jesus, entering into God’s redemptive, never-to-be-regretted plan for our lives - whatever that Plan B entails.