



GOOD NEWS: HOPE WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

Hope Believes “Yes” When Our Circumstances Say “No.”

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Text: **Matthew 1:18-21** (NLT)

Summary

Joseph’s circumstances seemed bleak. His betrothal to Mary created the hope of a wonderful life with the one he loved, but it seems that only moments later, he received the worst news possible – she was pregnant, and not by him. His “yes” to a new life suddenly became a “no” to possibility. This first sermon in Advent brilliantly helps us to experience what life must have been like for Joseph AND how God restored hope for him – and restores hope for you today.

¹⁸This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement ^[h] quietly.”

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus,^[i] for he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph was in a tough spot. Often overlooked as a bit player in the Christmas drama, his is actually a starring role in the revelation of God and a stellar life lesson for all of us. His world was messy, often beyond his control, and he reacted in ways that turned what might have been desperate moments into positive outcomes with sure-footed confidence.

Joseph has much to teach us. Today. Right now. This Christmas.

It’s easy to see the original Christmas narrative as a set-piece under the Christmas tree, a stylized creche with idealized figurines, each in their place: the baby Jesus, of course, at the center, with Mary, His mother, just to the side. Wise men line up on one side and shepherds on the other, with the occasional cow, donkey, or lamb hanging around for context. It was a

stable, after all. An angel might hover above the A-frame of our Nativity set, and somewhere, near the center but in the shadows stands Joseph—the dad, but not really. The custodial parent-by-marriage, but involved only because of his engagement to Mary, who (next to Jesus) usually gets most of the attention. That’s the snapshot, anyway, of the traditional scene. And, it’s a scene not without merit, as it captures a series of events from the birth of Jesus in a barn, to the cradle of an animal’s feeding trough, to the shepherd’s visit, to the wise guys from the East who eventually drop in, all in a single, condensed frame.

But, the story is much more complicated than that. The Christmas story of Christmas cards, Christmas carols, Christmas pageants, and all the rest, is actually a slice of real life, in real time, with real people. It is real history, preserved across time and space to speak into our lives, here and now.

Joseph’s journey, when you stop to think about it, can be especially relevant today. He, like many of us, found his life turned upside down and had to navigate through towering disappointments and challenges. Still, he overcame them and leaves us some important clues about how we can do the same.

No one knows how old Joseph was at the time the events of that first Christmas described in Matthew actually took place. Some have speculated that he was a middle-aged or even an older man, engaged to a much younger Mary. Others have concluded, based on the most straightforward reading of the textual evidence, that he was a young man, engaged to a slightly younger peer, as was customary at the time. This would place him at about 18 years of age at his public engagement (or betrothal, as it was then called); Mary was likely between the ages of 14 and 16. These were ordinary ages for **betrothal** and marriage in Joseph’s world, 2,000 years ago. Let’s run with this understanding: Joseph is a young guy, very much looking forward to getting married.

With this in mind, put yourself in Joseph’s shoes and walk for little while. The first thing you’ll notice is that your dreams can be suddenly upended, without any fault of your own. Of course, you’ve probably already learned this in life—I certainly have. We make our plans, pursue dreams and ambitions we consider to be worthy, even noble, work hard, play by the rules, and then, bam, we discover that someone else got in the way, some circumstance has intervened, a key player dropped the ball, my employer went under, a storm tore through the neighborhood, whatever, but, bottom line, we’re suddenly left by the curb wondering what to do next.

This is Joseph’s challenge, so long ago. To become engaged in the ancient world was no small step. There would be a public **betrothal**, celebrated by friends and family, known throughout the town. The engaged couple would then, for all intents and purposes, be married, except that they would not live together; this stage would ordinarily last for a year and could only be ended by a deliberate kind of procedural engagement “divorce.” Joseph’s hometown of Nazareth was a small town with a population archaeologists have suggested would not exceed

400 in his lifetime. This means that Joseph and Mary's engagement would be understood by everyone in town, not just a small circle.

Sexual ethics were very strict in those days—and strictly observed. Sex was reserved for marriage. No extra-marital sexual play, exploration, discovery zone, or pursuits were permitted. Young men and women, in the main, lived up to these parameters and were careful not to cross the lines, for fear of the severe social repercussions that failure to do so would bring. Engagements could be arranged by older members of a family, but young men and women were not without romance and passion. Once the engagement and marriage date were set, young couples naturally believed the best about each other, hoped for the best for each other, and counted the days until they could be free to fully enjoy each other in every way, as husband and wife, with the blessing of friends and neighbors. Young couples 2,000 years ago, like young couples today, made plans and dreamed dreams of life together, establishing a home and embracing the adventure, as one.

The Scripture tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. This tells us that he was unusually scrupulous, paying attention to the rules and regs, always coloring within the lines, as he best understood them. It also tells us that he wanted to do the right thing, always. I'm certain that he had his moments—we all do—but, for the most part, this was a nice guy, a good man, the friend and partner upon whom all could depend.

I'm not sure I could be described as a righteous man; I can't speak for you. I know I have a conscience and I know I have sometimes betrayed it. I'm not always proud of what I have done (or not done); I'm no Joseph. But, I am someone who wants to be better than I am and who wants to make the right choices along the way. I'm guessing you are, in this, the same.

But, for all of the hard work, good intentions, careful thought, and faithfulness, Joseph one day learns his fiancé is pregnant. And he knows, absolutely, that he is not the father. This unexpected development is a mess up of the first magnitude. Devastating. Unbelievable. Outrageous. Hurtful. Crushing. Humiliating.

How did she tell him? Where were they? How far along was she when she broke the news? However it was, it must have been awful. And the whole, "the Holy Spirit came upon me" thing? Seriously? It may have just made the first headline-in-the-conversation worse.

I suspect Joseph, like any of us, went through some stages of grief and loss: disbelief, anger, and despair, until eventually his emotional pendulum landed at hopeless. That's where much of our world is today. Disappointment, loss of control, betrayal, "how could this happen?" and "how could this happen to me?" are all a part of the everyday norm these days, sad to say. Maybe that is where your world is today. I get it. We all get it. We've all been there or will be someday. That's life.

Joseph, however, makes an important choice—that we do not always make—in response to his inevitable frustration and disappointment: he decides to move forward without malice, without bitterness, without the need to punish or blame anyone. Matthew tells us that he decided to extricate himself from his relationship with Mary quietly, with the least drama possible. He might have reacted very differently and been justified in doing so, by the measure of all present, but instead he chooses grace over judgment, peace over conflict, righteous mercy over a wounded punch back. He chose not to be angry with God or with Mary or whoever it was had fathered the child. Never forget, after the first emotional moment of disappointment and frustration subsides, anger is always a choice.

I believe this softening of his heart is what allowed God to walk in with an angelic message. The word angel literally means messenger. And, an angel—a messenger from God—appeared to Joseph in a dream, supernaturally, to help steady the ship and clothe him with hope. God is always ready with an encouraging word—and the clothing of hope—if our hearts can hear and receive Him; when disappointed or injured, we can be too often preoccupied with our own victimization or need for some punitive outcome to hear from Heaven. Not so with Joseph; his heart was turned toward God. This is key.

And, God gave Joseph a word. A word that would change everything. First, God helped Joseph see that there was some significant backstory to his sense of immediate loss. Joseph was reassured that God was working in the situation far above and beyond what he could imagine or think. The Apostle Paul famously wrote to the believers in Rome (Romans 8:28) that **God works all things work together for the good for those who are called according to His purpose.** This is not just some religious mumbo-jumbo; it is truth. No matter how dark the moment, how deep the valley, how desperate the cause, God can and will work things together for the good, yes, today, in your life, too, if you will surrender to His purpose and goodwill.

Furthermore, God explained to Joseph that his life was being woven into a spectacular divine plan to set all things right in this world, to fulfill prophecies of old, and to redeem life and save us from sin (and its ultimate twisted consequences). God helped Joseph to understand that Jesus—the soon-to-be Child of Bethlehem—was the key to everything and that he, Joseph, had an important role to play.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah, centuries before Joseph, had remarkably made a precise forecast (Isaiah 7:14 NLT): **All right then, the Lord Himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call Him Immanuel (which means, “God is with us”).** Isaiah’s original audience was a people like Joseph, backed into a corner with seemingly no way out. He spoke to them and to the ages—he speaks to us—about the plan of God, from before the foundation of the world to rescue His creation and us from sin and from the corruption, heartache, and disappointment it always brings. In the crisis, Joseph began to comprehend that Mary was this virgin and that this baby-to-be-named-Jesus was, in fact, the Immanuel, the God-with-us, in Person, up close and personal (cf Matthew 1:22-24).

He was not alone; he would soon be in the company of God Himself. The crises in our lives can be doorways through which we also make this same astonishing discovery. ***Jesus is the exact representation of God in human form*** (cf Colossians 1:15-16). He is God with us.

Every broken place in our lives, even in the Creation itself, can be traced back to sin, somewhere, someone's. From Eden's day until today, sin is the root of all misery. All of us individually have a history of sin, too. Each of us have failed, at some point or another, to do the right thing, to be the people God created us to be. If we're honest, none of us are strangers to shame and guilt; these are the long shadow of sin, even if we are reluctant to admit it. And we're backed into a corner by it. We can't find a way out alone.

Which brings us back to Jesus, to the Immanuel, to the holy Child of Bethlehem. Mary did not sin in the conception of Jesus; no, the sinful, broken world around her might have thought so, but Joseph learned that God was righteously at work in her life—and his—for this end: to breathe hope and life into all who humbly, like Joseph, bow before Him and follow His lead, accepting the gift of Jesus.

It was good news. Really good news. Not only were things not as bad as Joseph had imagined, they were better than he could have dreamed. Joseph was then, right up front, faced with a new decision to make: would he embrace the good news or deny it? All that would follow hung in the balance. He had to accept the gift of Jesus or walk away and struggle to open a new chapter alone. He had to come to terms that Jesus was coming into this world not to rob him of his dreams, but to fulfill them. Joseph had to surrender to the idea that Jesus was born to save, not interrupt or subtract from his life. The very name, Jesus, means the Lord saves. In the same way, this Christmas, we also have a decision to make.

Joseph bought in. He was all in. From that day forward until he fades from the pages of Scripture (after Jesus turns twelve), Joseph embraces Jesus as the one Who came to save. Joseph came to see that Jesus came to literally take back what hell had stolen at the dawn of time: life abundant as God intended.

What an adventure then unfolded before Joseph and the woman who indeed became his wife! There would be many inconvenient and challenging twists and turns in their road ahead—forced to travel a long ways on foot to Bethlehem by a government beyond their control, forced to flee to another country as refugees by the dangers posed by a wicked government at home, perplexed on some days by a boy who seemed to know more than anybody else, even the religious experts and leaders of their world—but, at every step, Joseph knew life, because he knew Jesus. Everything would work together for the good. Sin would be in retreat from the day Jesus was born. And Joseph had a front row seat. Ultimately, Joseph is not the subject of this story, Jesus is.

This Christmas, you can move to the front row, too. You can choose to respond to the disappointments, the tough moments, the world beyond your ability to control, with grace and mercy and tune your heart, as did Joseph, to Heaven. And, this Christmas, you can choose to embrace Jesus, as did Joseph, knowing that He is the key to everything. Yes, you may find yourself on an unpredictable ride. Yes, you will assume some new risks. Yes, you will be tempted to wonder if the Good News is really fake news. But, take your cue from Joseph and you will discover new life, new hope, and the extraordinary sense that God is working your life together for the good. No matter what.

This Christmas, remember, there may be some significant backstory to what you see on the surface. Remember that you can choose to respond to what you see with grace. Remember that God still speaks to those who seek Him and surrender to His goodwill. And, remember that Jesus was born and that He lives. Right here. Right now. For you. For me. For Heaven's sake. To give life (*cf* John 20:31).

Don't let this Christmas pass without taking the dare: surrender to Jesus and let the celebration of His birth be the threshold of your new birth. Be encouraged. Merry Christmas. God is with us. He longs to be with you.