

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ 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.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Look What God was Doing!

Christmas is a wonderful time of year. In songs and on Christmas cards, we call this night a holy night, a wondrous night, a night of miracles. This evening just stirs our hearts. Because we know that Christmas is about God intervening in this world, for ages people have multiplied miracles at Christmas. Today, that takes on a very crass and even silly obsession with a Christmas miracle. Most of your favorite TV shows probably had some kind of Christmas miracle episode, even if they mocked the idea. But you know what? The tendency to multiply miracles at Christmas is ancient. Christians in the past didn't imagine Santa Claus doing the miracle, but going back to at least the Middle Ages, people have made up miracles that involve the baby Jesus, everything from animals talking on Christmas night to Jesus smiling at the little drummer boy. But this night doesn't need us to multiply miracles. God did far greater things than having dogs talk or babies smile at drummer boys. What he did in Bethlehem has far greater consequences for our lives than any Christmas miracle on any TV show ever could. Tonight, we want to appreciate the gift God gave us. My friends, **look what God was doing!**

I.

Our gospel lesson for this evening gives us a great place to start: **look what God was doing through the life of Joseph!** Joseph didn't see Christmas coming. He was betrothed to Mary. The Jewish custom of betrothal was more than an engagement. It was such a serious commitment that it required a legal divorce to break. And yet, the couple was still not formally married, so we can think of it in terms of an engagement this evening. Now, we don't actually know a lot about Joseph. The Catholic Church has a number of traditions about him, but who knows if any of it is true. The Bible simply states that he was a descendant of King David and he was betrothed to Mary. Presumably, he was looking forward to the day when he and Mary would start their lives together.

But then Mary turned up pregnant. Joseph made the natural assumption. As far as we know there's only one way that happens and Joseph knew he didn't have anything to do with it. But his reaction shows the character of the man God chose to serve as Jesus' human father. Matthew says, **“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”** In what sense was he “righteous”? In his compassion for Mary. Think how different Joseph's actions were from the ugliness we see so often today when two people break up and certainly when two people get divorced. Today, those people often work hard to subject their former spouse or fiancé to public disgrace. They call each other names and tell horrible lies and even truths about each other.

Joseph was a model of Christian restraint and compassion. He didn't worry about how he would look. He thought about Mary and how hard this was going to be on her and he didn't want to subject her to public shame. So he was just going to quietly divorce her. But then the angel Gabriel appeared to him and essentially said, “Now wait just a minute Joseph! Let me tell you what's really going on here!” Joseph accepted the angel's words as true. He didn't argue or question. He accepted that Mary had experienced something that no

one before her ever had and no one after her ever would. The Holy Spirit did a miracle in her womb and she conceived. He believed the word of the Lord.

And he also accepted the other thing God said to him through the angel: **“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.”** What would he have been afraid of? If Mary had slept around once before, she might do it again. But Joseph accepted the angel’s words: he had nothing to fear from taking her as his wife. So Joseph accepted his role in God’s plan. He accepted the job of being the father of a baby that was not his. What did that mean? Certainly love and affection, but there was so much more. It meant being a provider and a protector and even a teacher for the infant Son of God. Joseph agreed without even knowing all that would be demanded of him.

When he learned it by experience, he stayed at the job. He transported that very pregnant wife to Bethlehem when the census demanded it. That certainly had to be hard on Mary, but it couldn’t have been easy for Joseph, either. He worked to provide food and shelter for this child. When Jesus was circumcised, Joseph and Mary brought the offerings specified for poor people, so providing for this child wasn’t easy. When God warned Joseph that Herod wanted to kill the child, he didn’t say, “Sorry, Mary I didn’t sign up this” and run out on them. He fled with his family to safety in Egypt. Then when the danger had passed, he brought them back. When Jesus was twelve years old Joseph took him to Jerusalem for the Passover. He accepted his role as teacher of the Jewish covenant to his son. And when they lost him in Jerusalem, he spent three days tearing his hair out looking for him. Then he took him back to Nazareth to continue his job as Jesus’ human father.

And he never even got to see the payoff! He’s never mentioned after Jesus was twelve so he probably died before Jesus’ ministry began. But God called Joseph to this role and as far as we can tell, he did a good job. But let’s remember what the job was: caring for and providing for this real human baby so that when he was thirty years old, he could be baptized by John the Baptist and then preach and teach and after three years suffer and die and rise again. My friends, this story is not about Joseph. That’s probably why we know so little about him. The story is really about Christ. But because God sent his Son into this world as a real human being, the baby Jesus, the boy Jesus, the adolescent Jesus needed all the same real people in his life that any other real human boy needs. So God provided a father. God didn’t just do a good job picking him, God molded Joseph to be the man of faith that he was so that when God called him to do all this, he stepped up to the plate.

But it was all God providing the Savior we need. We see just how perfectly God worked out our salvation, not just in the stable of Bethlehem, but in the waters of the Jordan River and out in the wilderness facing the devil’s temptations and in the preaching and the teaching and the healing that Jesus did. We see how perfect God’s plan and preparations were when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and when he walked out again on Good Friday carrying his cross. We see that God knew what he was doing when his Son died and paid for our sins and then rose to give us eternal life. Joseph was one important piece of God’s plan. And it all worked to perfection.

II.

But Joseph wasn’t the only person God called to be a piece of his plan. Perhaps the most famous and in many ways the most important piece of that plan is the young woman Joseph was engaged to: Mary. When you look at all God did through her, you can’t help but wonder at the true miracles of Christmas. **Look what God was doing through the life of Mary!**

We don’t really know much more about Mary than we do about Joseph, although she clearly did live to see Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. In all probability, she was a teenager at this time. Girls married young in those days. And she was a virgin. She had been faithful to her future husband. In all that she does in the Bible, we see her faith shining through. She accepted a role that was unique in all of history: to be the mother of Christ. Did she comprehend what it would cost her when she accepted? Did she know what Joseph was thinking of doing? Did she endure other comments and gossip, even after he married her? It’s hard to say. But even aside from all that, Mary, too, was going to endure all those things that Joseph did to raise this child and more. As Simeon told her, a sword would pierce her heart. She would stand at Jesus’ feet and watch him die.

But there is so much more to this story than just a mother’s love. Matthew says, **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us.’”** This was God’s plan since before the world began. This child, this mother, this step-father were all brought together by God. He told his people this birth was coming seven hundred years before it happened. A virgin would become pregnant and give birth

to a son. Maybe in our day of in vitro fertilization that doesn't seem like quite the miracle it once did, but keep in mind, no medical procedure took place. Even in an in vitro fertilization, there is still a human father providing human DNA. In Christ, there was only the egg in Mary's womb that miraculously became a full human being. How that happened, only God can say. But he caused Mary to conceive.

The angel told Joseph to name the child Jesus and Isaiah prophesied that he would be named Immanuel. In our day, we tend to think of names in terms of how they sound or who they remind us of. In the Bible naming someone tells you who and what that person is. Isaiah was not saying that anyone was ever going to address Jesus as "Immanuel." You can't find a verse like that anywhere in the Bible. In fact, this is the last time the word is mentioned. But the name tells us who Jesus really is: God with us. He is true God begotten of his Father from eternity. He existed long before he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He was there at creation. But now he is with us. God has joined himself to our humanity in the person of Christ and that union will never end. Today, in heaven, Jesus is still God and man.

Why is he God and man? That's what the other name tells us. The angel said, **"You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."** When I was a child and I attended a school like ours, every year we would memorize this passage for the children's Christmas service. And I always wondered about that "because." What does it mean? Well, if you look in your Bibles, you'll see a footnote that tells you what that because means. It says that Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua which means "the Lord saves." To put it more simply, the name Jesus means Savior. That's who came in the womb of the Virgin Mary. That's who was born on Christmas night. God is now with us so that he could save us. God became man so that God could live and die and rise again to pay for all our sins. God took man into his person so that his life and death and resurrection would count for all of us. Just as we use wrapping paper to hide and also to present a gift to those we love, God used the humanity of Jesus to hide and to present the Son of God to us so that our sins are paid for and we will live forever. To do that, he created Mary and called her and from her womb he gave us our Savior.

The cross was still thirty plus years away when God did these things. Later, the Bible tells us that Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. All this was God's plan. Christmas celebrates that plan. Christmas presents us with the greatest miracles in all of scripture. What more do we need? God made himself man to save us. We will live forever because he did. Celebrate that gift! Amen.