

## God With Us

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 21, 2025

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### **Matthew 1:18-25**

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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.

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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and Joseph named him Jesus.

### INTRODUCTION

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent, the season of preparation, and today four candles are burning in our Advent wreath. Our musicians and singers have been preparing special Christmas music for months. Organ, bells, and singers will lift our hearts as we contemplate the transcendent love of God that is beyond words. Yesterday, we made these beautiful evergreen garlands. Children and adults were working, laughing, and struggling to carry these heavily laden ropes to the sanctuary as we've done for over a century. And we hung the illuminated painting of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child to remind us that redemption began with the obedience, love, and devotion of two ordinary people who brought forth a special child. In our gospel lesson for today, we heard about one of those people, a man named Joseph.

### JOSEPH

Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus, unlike Luke's gospel, focuses on Joseph instead of Mary. By and large Christians have preferred Luke's account. Christian artists have painted countless pictures of the Annunciation from Luke's Gospel when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she had been chosen by God. All of our creches and nativity scenes place Mary in the foreground while Joseph is often in the shadows.

The passage I read from Matthew's gospel tends to be left out of our Christmas celebrations. When Charlie Brown in Peanuts cries out in confusion and begged someone to tell him what Christmas is all about, his friend Linus recited **Luke's** version of the Christmas story. It is Luke who paints the tableau that children all over the world re-enact every Christmas with winged angels singing and robed shepherds kneeling beside the manger. Joseph's only role in our Christmas pageants is to bring Mary to Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn.

#### RIGHTEOUS MAN

It is Matthew who makes Joseph a major figure in the Christmas story. But all that Matthew tells us about Joseph is that he was a descendent of King David and that Mary was betrothed to be his wife. Before they were married, Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant and that he was not the father. Matthew doesn't elaborate on this situation. He doesn't tell us if Mary had told Matthew what had happened or what Matthew may have said to his betrothed. Did she tell him about the visit from Gabriel or the prophecy of her cousin Elizabeth? We don't know. Matthew simply says that Joseph was a righteous man with a problem.

Since he was righteous and well-respected among his peers, Joseph decided he could not marry Mary. In his eyes and the eyes of society she was guilty of adultery. She had shamed Joseph by getting pregnant. It would be shameful for a righteous man to marry Mary.

Joseph did not want to humiliate her, so he planned to cancel the marriage quietly rather than making a scene. However, even this would have destroyed Mary's life. As an unwed mother, she could be disowned by her family, ostracized by her synagogue, and thrown out into the streets to beg for food for her and her baby. This still happens to women in many places in our world today.

There was no social safety net in the first century for a woman like Mary or her child. Had Joseph abandoned them, mother and child would be left to die unaided and unmourned. They would have been victims of the cruelty of society. Think about it, the fate of the messiah depended on the decision of one righteous man. Would Joseph's righteousness make him cold hearted, or would it make him compassionate? Would he think only of his reputation, or would he think of what would happen to Mary and the child? Joseph had no idea that the future of the world depended on his choice.

## DREAM

Matthew tells us that Joseph decided to put Mary away quietly. He chose his reputation over her welfare. But then **God** intervened. There are many stories in the Old Testament where God intervened for the sake of a woman whom society shunned. Think of Hagar who gave birth to Abraham's son Ishmael or Hannah who was barren until God gave her the prophet Samuel as a son. And here in the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, God intervenes again for the sake of a vulnerable woman.

Matthew says that an angel, the messenger of God, came to Joseph in a dream. In the Old Testament, the patriarch Joseph was blessed with dreams and the ability to interpret them. The patriarch Joseph's dreams ultimately were the salvation of the Israelites. Here is another Joseph who had a dream that changed history.

Dreams are funny things. I often have vivid dreams that are interesting but don't make much sense. Sometimes, though, dreams reflect the problems that we have been thinking about. Perhaps the reason Joseph dreamed of the angel was because he was still struggling with his decision and with Mary's story about an angel coming to her and asking her to be the mother of the messiah.

All we know from Matthew's gospel, is that the angel in Joseph's dream told him to change his mind and take Mary as his wife because her child was special. Mary's child was a divine child destined for greater things than preserving the lineage of Joseph or caring for him in his old age. The angel said that Mary's child was destined to be the savior of Israel. Joseph was assured that there would be no shame in being the adoptive father of this child.

And Joseph believed the angel. The great theologian Martin Luther five hundred years ago said that there were three miracles at Christmas: that the

Word was made flesh; that a virgin conceived; and that Joseph believed. And Joseph obeyed.

The angel who appeared in his dream taught Joseph that righteousness must be united to compassion. When righteousness is tempered by compassion great things happen in the world. Righteousness alone is not enough.

The angel told Joseph to name the child Jesus, which was a common name, but the name Jesus gained new meaning with the first Christmas. The name Jesus reminded Joseph and us that God the creator, who brings life into the world, is also the God who brings salvation to the poor, the outcast, the shamed, and the frightened. Jesus' name means salvation.

## EMMANUEL

This story of the angel in a dream is beautiful and compelling, but Matthew takes things a step further by quoting from the prophet Isaiah who had made a predication about a young woman seven hundred years earlier. The Catholic Church and Handel's Messiah focus on this quote from Isaiah 7: "Behold a virgin shall conceive." They make Mary's virginity the focal point of Matthew's account, but today, I want us to focus on the second part of Isaiah's saying rather than the first. Isaiah said:

"They shall name him Emmanuel, which means God with us." For years I was confused by this since Joseph named the child Jesus, not Emmanuel.

Throughout the gospels and even on the cross Mary's son was called Jesus of Nazareth, not Emmanuel. Why did Matthew use this quote from an ancient prophecy about the name of the child?

This year it finally dawned on me that it wasn't Joseph or Mary who named the child Emmanuel. Other people did that. The name Emmanuel came from the people who walked with Jesus, were taught by Jesus, were healed by Jesus, and transformed by Jesus. It was those who followed Jesus to Golgotha and to the garden of another Joseph who called him Emmanuel. The name Emmanuel was bestowed on Mary's child by millions of people throughout history who have continued to follow Jesus and Jesus and whose lives have been blessed by Jesus. He was and is Emmanuel. [pause]

## CONCLUSION

Emmanuel: God with us.

God with us when we draw first breath. God with us at mother's breast. God with us as we learn. God with us at every turn. God with us in our tears. God with us in our fears. God with us in times of danger. God with us in face of stranger. God with us on Christmas morn. God with us in crown of thorn. Emmanuel. God with us now and ever more.

May we all know the blessing of Jesus, Emmanuel. May we feel in the depth of our souls that God is with us just as he was with Mary when she conceived and with Joseph as he dreamed. And may we know that God is still with us as go out into the world. Amen.