

Joseph's Story
Matt 1:18-25

Brothers and sisters, the Christmas Season is fully upon us, the lights are up, the decorations are out, Christmas music is on the air, and the Christmas movies and TV specials are on every day – the countdown to Christmas has started.

So brothers and sisters let me ask you are you ready for Christmas and are you starting to get into the Christmas Spirit, the reason for the Season?

We all know the reason for the season, but is it starting to impact you yet – or are you faced with a season that is the reason for a lengthy to-do list that you would just like to be able to check off and complete and have over and done with?

Well brothers and sisters, if not from the pulpit on a Sunday in December, where else will you be reminded – so let me remind all of us this morning about the reason for the season and what our lengthy to-do lists are all about.

Two thousand years ago God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life!

So... we're counting down the days now to our celebration of the arrival of Jesus Christ, the ultimate expression of God's love for his creation, for us – for his creatures.

And brothers and sisters, if you've ever been in love you know what a wonderful thing it is and what a powerful thing it is.

When you fall love with someone you are smitten by them - they make you feel warm and fuzzy all over, you can't think of anything else, you want to be around them all the time...doing nothing in particular, just gazing into each other's eyes...

And this can go on for weeks, months and if it continues to grow stronger then your thoughts start drifting towards making a life and a future with the person with whom you've fallen in love.

And in our culture that means the guy makes a trip down to Spence Diamonds to purchase an engagement ring and tries to figure out the appropriate way to pop “the question” to his girlfriend.

And if this happens close to the Christmas season, there’s a good chance a guy might decide to do it on Christmas Eve – because it’s more romantic and all, and hopefully it will increase the chance that his girlfriend will say yes and become his fiancé – and then they will be engaged to be married.

But once you’re engaged you need to make the transition from romantic love to a realistic love – because the reality is that spending a lifetime with someone will not always be romantic.

So while you are engaged you need to do the hard work of getting to know each other better and learning what the other person needs and how you can best serve them as their partner.

So an engagement is pretty serious, there’s a significant level of commitment and promise involved – but if there are doubts or problems that persist and can’t be resolved the couple can still break things off, the relationship is not fully legal just yet.

However the engagement which we read about in our scripture passage today between Mary and Joseph was a legally binding relationship.

If they discovered something about the other person that they couldn’t live with - the only way out of it was a divorce – even though they weren’t fully married yet.

So, when Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant, he has a potential scandal and a dilemma on his hands.

The scandal would be in the fact that people would naturally think He was responsible for getting Mary pregnant before they were married and his reputation would be ruined.

The dilemma arises because Joseph knows he has not done anything to father a child with Mary, so the only logical explanation for him is that Mary has cheated on him and committed adultery.

If he tries to save his own reputation by denying his part, it will clear him - but doubly ruin Mary's reputation, and put her life in jeopardy because in the Law of Moses adultery was grounds to be stoned to death.

Joseph can't lie and say that the child is his, but he doesn't want to disgrace Mary either, because he truly loves her – so the scripture says he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had decided to do this God sends an angel to explain to Joseph what is actually going on.

Mary is pregnant because of the work of the Holy Spirit, because she has been chosen to play a significant role in God's plan to save His people.

But, aside from vindicating Mary from the charges of having an affair have you ever wondered why God is so concerned that Joseph not divorce Mary, and that he stay with her as her husband?

Did God not want Jesus to grow up without a "Dad?" Maybe God felt it was best that Jesus grew up in a "normal" family?

Maybe God wanted Joseph to provide for Mary and Jesus, Maybe it would have been too scandalous for Mary to be a single mom in Jewish society?

Brothers and sisters, all these reasons may have some validity, but if we think about it for a moment God has a bit of a track record of bringing good out of scandalous situations – just look at the women listed in Jesus family tree in Matthew 1.

There's Tamar, a Canaanite, who masqueraded as a prostitute, and slept with her father-in-law, Judah. There's Rahab, also a Canaanite and a bona fide prostitute...

And there's Ruth – a Moabite, an immigrant woman from an enemy nation, and also Bathsheba whose exhibitionist rooftop bathing habits got her into an affair with King David.

I think God could have easily dealt with one more scandalous situation if Joseph didn't stick around, and God could have easily provided for Jesus too.

Think of how God provided manna for all the Israelites in the desert or how God fed the prophet Elijah during a famine by having birds bring him food.

Providing for Mary and Jesus wouldn't have been a problem for God – who was his real father after all...

Brothers and sisters, God needed to have Joseph stick around and legally marry Mary because Joseph was a descendant of King David.

In fact the angel goes out of his way to address him as such "*Joseph son of David!*"

You see brothers and sisters, long ago King David was promised by God that one of his descendants would always be King, would always sit on the throne and rule over Israel.

Psalm 89:3-4 God states "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations."

But, it had some conditions to it. Here's how God explained it to David's son Solomon when he became king.

"As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws,¹⁸ I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to rule over Israel.'

¹⁹ "But if y'all turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given y'all and go off to serve other gods and worship them,²⁰ then I will uproot Israel from my land,

which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. (2 Chronicles 7:17-19)

And unfortunately Solomon's successors did not keep God's decrees and commands, they were unfaithful to God and Israel was eventually sent into exile.

So, it had become apparent that the line of King David was unable to produce an heir to the throne of Israel who was capable of walking faithfully with God and leading the nation to do the same, and what this revealed was that the line of David was spiritually dead.

Now, in the ancient world if a man died without producing a son, an heir to his estate, that was a big problem.

It's like when someone dies in our day without having a will. No one knows what should be done with their property and children, so they become the property of the government.

It was similar back in ancient Israel. Without an heir, when a man died his property and land would simply be sold off and the widow and her daughters would be out of their inheritance and risk becoming destitute or indentured slaves.

So there was a custom, which later became a law when God gave Moses the 10 commandments, if that a deceased man had a brother, or another close relative – they were supposed to take the widow and give her a child, preferably a son.

Then the dead husband's line would have a legal heir to inherit the estate, and the property and the wealth would remain with the family and they would not become destitute or cease to exist. (Deut 25)

And the relative who was supposed to provide this heir was called the Kinsmen Redeemer.

Now I know this all sounds a bit strange to our ears – but this is how things worked back then, and in fact its what the whole story of Ruth is all about.

And while last months' Breakfast Theatre story was about Moses, in years past we've also done the story of Ruth and taken a much more in depth look at this custom of the Kinsmen Redeemer.

And being familiar with and understanding this custom is important, because it allows us to see what is going on between God and Joseph.

You see brothers and sisters, in the story of Joseph this morning we see God playing the role of a kinsmen redeemer.

While Joseph is not physically dead, he does represent the line of David - which was spiritually dead.

David's line was unable to produce an heir to the throne that was spiritually alive who would be able to lead Israel so they would love, obey, and worship God as faithful covenant partners.

So God steps in and takes Mary, who is legally bound to Joseph- spiritually dead - through engagement, and gives her a son - who will be spiritually alive.

It's critical that Christ was conceived while Joseph was engaged to Mary because it was a legal relationship characterized by no physical intimacy and thus no chance for any child to be produced.

If God had taken Mary outside of this circumstance His action would have amounted to divine adultery.

Instead God is redeeming the line of David, producing an heir who is spiritually alive and this means, as the angel says, "*He will save people from their sins*" – from being spiritually dead.

And the scripture tells us that all this happened to fulfill what had been foretold through one of the prophets, Isaiah 7:14 – "*the virgin will be with child and they will name him Emmanuel 'God with us'*" And that's pretty amazing isn't it brothers and sisters!

That God – the almighty, all powerful, all knowing creator - would want to be with us! That He had this desire for a long time, and that he was putting precise and specific plans into place in order to fulfill that desire.

But that's exactly what this is all about isn't it – For God so loved the world, he sent his one and only Son...

And by the grace and mercy of God, Joseph gets it.

Joseph realizes what God is going to do, and because he understands this, he is willing to take Mary as his wife, and wait to consummate their relationship until Jesus is born

He is willing to endure the gossip and scandal and the shame that will be attributed to him because Mary is found to be pregnant during the engagement.

His own reputation will be damaged because people will think he took advantage of Mary before they were married, or if they know Joseph would not do this – the only other

alternative is that he's engaged to an adulteress – and what kind of man would put up with that?

But Joseph is a righteous man, faithful to the law as the scripture says, but not just the letter of the law – also the spirit of the law. And the law was given to Israel as a means of grace - so Joseph was willing to endure the scandal and the shame, because he must have known this grace in the Law.

He is willing to take Jesus as his own son, raise him, and care for him, even though all the older people in the village will think Jesus is the child of another man. After all is that not what God had done for the people of Israel?

So, brothers and sisters Joseph understands that God is showing His love, and keeping His promise to King David by taking on the role of the Kinsmen Redeemer to him.

Because God so loved the world, Joseph is able to love Mary as his wife and love the boy Jesus as his own son.

And brothers and sisters as we countdown to Christmas, let us not lose ourselves in the business of all the preparation but make sure our celebration is a time to be confronted with God's amazing love.

A love that moved God to leave behind whatever it meant to be fully God – being all knowing, all powerful, all present and be conceived as a human baby – weak, ignorant, dependent, vulnerable, defined by space and time.

This is the essence of God's selfless love friends, and as we reflect on it through celebrating Christmas this season, we can have the confidence that God's love will cause us to respond to others in a like manner.

As Philippians 2:5-7 says ⁵ "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

So brothers and sister the truth about Christmas that comes to us from Joseph's story this morning is this.

Christ's birth has the power to bring forth love for God and love for others in our hearts... not because his being born should somehow inspire us, but because his birth God is stepping in to produce a new human being who is truly spiritually alive and saves us from our sin our relationships with one another, and that new humanity, that redeemed and spiritually alive human nature is available to us through the work of the Holy Spirit immersing us in Jesus.

Believe that friends, put your faith and your trust in that!

It is not the cuteness of a baby, or the coziness of a manger scene, or the glow of the stars, or the inspirational appearance of glorious angels that changes us at Christmas... it the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the same way that a new life – both spiritually and physically - was happening inside Mary by the power of the

Holy Spirit, so to the Spirit is working in us to apply that spiritually alive humanity of Jesus Christ to us, so that we can grow beyond sentimental love into selfless love.

Believe in that, trust in that, put your faith in that at Christmas brothers and sisters...

Because for all of the sentimental Christmas spirit that we're supposed to be feeling during the holidays, nothing really highlights our faults and failing and broken relationships and dysfunctional situations like the Christmas holidays – right?

Having to celebrate with co-workers that you don't get along with, giving gifts to people who you don't particularly like... being able to avoid family conflict all year long but at Christmas you kind of have to spend with them – and if you choose to avoid it, then you're upsetting things by not getting together with the family...

Or there's the challenges of being single over the holidays, dealing with divorces and custody arrangements and/or blended family situations for the celebrations and gifts.

We can pretend like this isn't issue, but there's usually something relationally that Christmas season and celebrations will tend to bring to the surface, and it's a reminder that too are spiritually dead because of sin – and our human relationship break down reflects a much deeper fundamental relationship breakdown between ourselves and God.

So brothers and sisters, this morning I want speak God's word into that for you.

Just as God sent an angel to speak to Joseph so that he was aware of what was happening, that it was of God and that enabled him to accept it...

I want to speak to whatever dysfunctional and broken situations you will be encountering at Christmas, whatever faults and failing you have that will be exposed this season...

And I want to speak that whatever is spiritually dead in you will be replaced by the new life, the redeemed human nature that was born into this world in Jesus Christ.

This is not something that you do brothers and sisters – it is a working of the Holy Spirit, who is present and active among us this morning.

This is the Holy Spirit bringing the new life of Jesus into us and I want to encourage you to have faith and trust and believe that He will, and is, and will continue to bring new life into you.

So that in spite of what we experience this Christmas with each other's brokenness and weaknesses, in spite of how sin causes us to hurt and offend each other, and regardless of situations which might continually remind us of this...

We will unexpectedly - be able to show the selfless love of our Heavenly Father, instead of sentimental love.

Just like Joseph did as a fiancé and husband to Mary and as an earthy father to Jesus... because brothers and sisters that is the true reflection and meaning of what God's love has done for us in sending his one and only Son.

That is the power of our Heavenly Father's love for us at Christmas friends! Amen.