

“Christmas Character: Joseph”

Matthew 1:18-25

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Today’s Scripture reading describes the angel Gabriel appearing to Joseph in his dream. Joseph is an important character in the gospel of Matthew. This is a unique account written in the gospel of Matthew. The virgin Mary encountered the angel Gabriel in the gospel of Luke. In the New Testament, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have an account describing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and their unique perspectives. Regarding the physical birth of Jesus, only two gospels, Matthew and Luke, explain how Jesus our Messiah was born. Neither Mark nor John have any account of Jesus’ birth. Why do you think Joseph is so special in this story? What makes him an important character in the gospel of Matthew? There must be a reason why Matthew’s account of the birth speaks to Joseph’s character. This morning, I invite us all to learn more about “Joseph”, the fiancé of Mary and the father of Jesus.

Let’s begin with the gospel of Matthew. This gospel was written for the Jewish-Christians community following the disciple Matthew and his community’s faith for Christ Jesus. The gospel of Matthew has two specific goals: The first one is to assure Jewish Christians that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior whom they have been awaiting for ages. In Jewish tradition, there was a legend that the Messiah would be born out of King David’s family and the town of Bethlehem. The disciple Matthew and his community took this seriously and tried to explain the birth of Jesus as a completion of Jewish legacy through the genealogical point of view. You will notice that only the gospel of Matthew describes Jesus’ family tree matching King David, his birth place, town of Bethlehem as Jesus’ birth place. Jesus is described as One who is greater than King David and superior to Moses. Christ-child is the Son of God and the Messiah for all people.

The other important mission is to proclaim that God is not up in the sky nor at a throne in the universe, but God is right here, God is present and God is with us in this child. In other words, the promise of God “with skin on” is found in Christ-child. This is a significant theological point in the gospel of Matthew. What do you think is the most important message in the Bible? Pastor John Ortberg says in his book, “God is Closer Than You Think” that “the central promise in the Bible is not ‘I will forgive you,’ although of course that promise

is there. It is not the promise of life after death, although we are offered that as well. The most frequent promise in the Bible is ‘I will be with you.’ ”

The angel Gabriel delivered the same message to Joseph: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’. In an account of Matthew, Christ-child is a visible and tangible God and the Son of God was born to Mary and Joseph’s family by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was invited to be part of God’s great plan as the father of Jesus. Let’s look at Mary and Joseph’s situation. We usually assume that Mary and Joseph grew up and lived in Nazareth, but Joseph’s hometown was most likely Bethlehem which is around eighty miles south. Since Joseph lived in Bethlehem, we guess Mary’s engagement was most likely a long-distance arrangement made by their families in both towns. Bethlehem was six miles away from Jerusalem. Mary was told that she would be pregnant by the Holy Spirit in Nazareth and she *was* pregnant there. But Joseph didn’t know exactly what happened to her. While pregnant, Mary traveled down to visit her cousin Elizabeth in Ein Karem and stayed there for three months. Ein Karem was near Bethlehem just 4 miles away. Joseph probably would have met Mary there and heard of Mary’s pregnancy at Elizabeth’s house.

Can we imagine Joseph’s shock, despair, anger and tragic broken heart when he heard from Mary that she was pregnant with someone else’s baby? No matter what Mary said to him, he would have been hurt. Maybe it was the worst day ever in his life. It must be very challenging but the Bible says that he humbly obeyed God’s will. Why was he so bold and courageous to keep his heart and faith trusting in God? What spiritual insights can we find from him? There are three points in this story.

The First, spiritual discernment to trust in God: Joseph met the angel Gabriel and heard about God’s plan in his dream. I am not putting a great emphasis on your dreams as you sleep. What Joseph experienced in his dream was about God’s promise through the angel Gabriel. That was the central point of his dream: It was ‘Emmanuel’ ‘God is with *him*’. In spite of hardships and challenges in his life, he put his trust in Emmanuel God. When he met with this God, he was not any more afraid but overcame his crisis trusting in God. We Christians are not shaken by our circumstances but we stand firm trusting in God. What Joseph experience in the midst of challenges was a simple message that God would be with him. I hope that we all have this faith!

Secondly, Joseph trusted Mary. If he didn’t trust her, he would have walked away from this situation and left her quietly. Then he wouldn’t have

been part of God's plan. But he never abandoned her. We need to remember a simple truth that God is working not only through you, but also through others around you. Maybe God will be working through your wife. Do not ignore your wife's sincere advice for you!! Or God may work through your husband or your partner or through your friends and loved ones. God works through our relationships! Joseph didn't desert Mary. Rather he encouraged and assured Mary that he would go with her to Bethlehem. I believe this is why the gospel of Matthew lifts up Joseph.

Lastly, we need to remember that God speaks not through special people, but continues to speak even through you and me! The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. Joseph and the shepherds were not specially chosen people, but they were ordinary people. They opened their hearts and carefully listened to God's voice around them. Joseph can be you or the Virgin Mary can be you. God still continues to speak through us and God's messenger can be you and me or others as well. I hope that we will be more sensitive to hear God's messages.

In this holy season, God's visible sign, the Christ-child is coming closer to us. God's messengers, angels, continue to appear to us and want to share these signs. Is there a message for you? In our continuing Christmas worship, prayer and advent participations, I hope and pray that we all become more spiritually sensitive to catch God's messages. Amen.