

Matthew 1:18-25 "Living into God's Story"

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

God bless. Morning, Church. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for this morning and the chance to gather around your Word with your community at your table.

We thank you for the gift of your Word. We ask that you would help us to eat of it this morning and that there we would find life.

[1 : 40] We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So over the last six years, I worked with refugees who were stuck in the middle of the desert, in North Africa, many living in tents, extremely limited water resources, and these refugees were hosted by another country along the border in settlements. These refugees were waiting, longing, and fighting to go home. Their home country, in the meantime, was in fact under the control of another authority. Their leaders were operating in the refugee camps as a government in exile.

So imagine this was you. You wake up each morning in a place that you call home somehow, but in a very real sense is not your true home. You live under the laws and customs of a foreign land that you would do well to obey, but that do not define you in a deeper sense. You see the signs, you see the flags, you see all the signs that point to the fact that you're not in your home and remind you of where your home really is. You respect these signs, these flags, but they do not define you.

Well, this is the life of someone caught up in between two very different stories, two very different narratives, living under two sets of rules, living under two sets of customs, and somehow in your day-to-day life you have to reconcile these two things together somehow. To stay, to set up your life in the camps means to live into one story. To fight to go back or to abandon the cause and seek education and health care and whatever you can get outside of the camps is to live into yet another story. And so the people that I worked with were caught in between these two stories. In the text we read this morning from Matthew, which tells the story of Jesus's birth from Joseph's perspective, we see that Joseph found himself in two stories in a sense, two competing narratives, and they're the same two stories that we find ourselves in as well this morning. One of these stories was we might call the dominant story of the day, the story of his community expectations, the way that society sees things, the values that shaped his society. It's the world of common sense, the world that you can touch with your hands and see with your eyes. It's a story that we piece together and have the sense of, in our context we might call this the Canadian story. And the other story that interposes itself onto this story is the story that God tells.

It's the story in which God is speaking to us, that he tells us where we came from, who we are, where we're going, and how we should live. One story depends on sight, the other story depends on faith.

One story is the story of our reasoning, the other story of God's revelation. Now these stories are not always in contradiction. There are varying degrees in which these stories compete and align in every place and culture. But one thing is sure, that just as Joseph, as for us, there is a point, probably many points, of time in which these stories come into direct competition with each other. That these stories are on a crash-collision course, and we are forced to choose which story will shape us, which story do we truly believe in. When the stories contradict one another, which story will you find yourself in? And as we'll see this morning, we are invited to join the better story, the truer story, the one that will lead to life.

[6 : 08] At the start of our text, I invite you to pull up your Bibles and follow along in Matthew chapter 1. At the beginning of the text, we find that Joseph is very much operating within that first story.

Stuck, you might say, within that first story. He's in a moment of crisis, caught in the middle of this apparent scandal. For Mary, his fiancée was found to be pregnant, and it certainly was not of his doing.

We're not given a lot of details in the text, And so we might wonder exactly how Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy. Did it reach him through the grapevine?

Was it an official family-to-family communique, where one father-in-law to another was trying to keep this marriage plan together? Did Joseph drop in once and notice that unmistakable pregnancy glow that so many people talk about, that I never saw in my wife, but other people did?

It doesn't seem that Mary told Joseph exactly what happened, what she had heard from the angels, from the details of the text. It doesn't sound like Joseph was weighing out this report and its accuracy.

[7 : 24] But in any case, however Joseph heard or found out, his fiancée was indeed pregnant. There's a song I was listening to this past week from a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter that says, singing about Mary, says, The day you're getting married and this isn't what you dreamed of, walking down the aisle at eight months, they'll never understand that this isn't what you planned.

Now it might be a little anachronistic thinking about an aisle walking in first century Judaism and in Palestine, but the point is this.

This marriage, this young love, which was supposed to be a pure, good moment of community celebration, that it was overshadowed in a sense of shame.

That Joseph, in order, you know, we know the story of Joseph walking to Bethlehem by donkey with his wife, that before that, Joseph would have had some sort of arrangement where he took Mary, pregnant Mary, to come home with him and his wife.

And we can only imagine what the neighbors would have thought. Over the last 10 plus years, we've lived in many cultures that are very community-based, very traditional, and where indeed the neighbors talk.

[8 : 58] We had to be careful about the groceries that we brought home, walking home in our bags, because if we had too many Western products or too many things that would have cost a pretty penny, we would have been judged for that.

It seemed that the people around us, our neighbors, the people we lived, with and amongst, that they would take anything to gossip about and talk about and spin a story about you of.

And I imagine that Mary and Joseph's day was no different, that they had to endure the judgment and the shame that went along with this moment, very unfortunately.

And so at the start of this, our text, we find that Joseph was operating within this first story, and of course, it was no simple thing just to call off the engagement.

There's a friend of mine who, when he tells the story of his marriage, marriage, he talks about how he met his wife who was engaged to another fellow at the time, and long story short, he got in there and stole her away.

[10 : 15] And in his words, he says, it's not over till it's over. And whether you may or may not have been so bold as to scoop in there and end another engagement, we, I think we mostly think that this sort of thing is acceptable, you know, according to our rules of dating, engagement, and marriage.

You know, it's not marriage until both parties say, I do. Well, it wasn't so in Joseph's day. Engagement and marriage were linked together such that for Joseph to call off the engagement was for him to call off the marriage and a divorce was in order.

And so this is where we find Joseph at the start of the story not wanting to put Mary to shame despite his confidence of how this baby must have come about. We find him considering, reasoning, agonizing, looking at the facts, trying to wrap his mind around what is happening, what God is doing.

We read in the text that Joseph is described as a just man, which means that he was a good guy. He would have followed God's law and would have had a degree of honor and respect from his community.

But his reputation, the life that he built, is all now under attack. And all of a sudden, upon the angel's visitation in a dream at night, crashing into Joseph's world of predictability and common sense and community expectations, comes God and his word.

[11 : 56] God's story interposing itself on his. God's story contradicting what Joseph saw with his eyes. And Joseph was at a fork in the road, a choice before him.

Which story would he play into? Which story would he choose to be a part of? And we read, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream.

Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And so imagine waking up the next day in Joseph's shoes or maybe in Joseph's bed and there's a decision hanging over you.

I think we've all had that moment where we go to bed with an awful decision before us. Sometimes we wake up in this blissful state where we forget the decision before us and it takes a couple seconds before we get sucker punched and wake up to reality.

Sometimes we somehow dream all night about the decision and we wake up somehow already sick to our stomach. Whatever it was for Joseph, he woke up and we ask ourselves the question if you were to wake up in his shoes, where would your mind go?

[13:18] What would you do? All that Joseph had built up flashes before his eyes and he might be thinking to himself, even if the angel, even if what the angel was telling me was true, who is going to believe this?

All forever be the loser that got married to a loose wife, whose child is not my own, quite literally, shame on me. It's remarkable what God asks of Joseph and what he asks of me and you.

So often, God's word provides us with the ability to live respectable lives, fulfilling lives that mark us out as good neighbors, leaders, spouses, parents, friends, friends, friends, in ways that can be appreciated and understood by the community around us.

The faith makes us into people that are serving the common good. But just as often, maybe a little bit more, God's word has the very opposite effect.

That living in his story will set us apart in ways that will be met with mocking, with incredulity, or disbelief. And so for Joseph, as for us, there was no getting around this fact.

[14:42] To go through with what God told Joseph to do, being misunderstood, would have been completely unavoidable. And this seems to be, for whatever reason, a part of God's will for us.

To go through with lives where we, at times, will be grossly misunderstood. And we can feel the whiplash of being jostled between our faith being received as a good to society and sometimes our faith being received as an ill to society.

I think this is a particular challenge for those of us who live in the post-Christian culture that we find ourselves in, where faith is disputed, where we somehow need to give a justification for belief of any kind in this day and age.

And I don't know about you, but being a minority in this majority type of culture, I've spent years and much energy trying to live out my faith in a way that can be understood and appreciated by my wider culture.

I want to show the world that I have in my faith the very things they long for. Hope, love, forgiveness. I want to show that my faith answers life's big questions. I want to show the world that I'm intellectually honest, that God's law is not arbitrary or harmful, but is freeing, that I can bring together the methods of the enlightenment, the impulses of romanticism, the critiques of post-modernity into some cohesive framework, traditional, historic and ancient and reformed.

[16:25] I want to argue that the scriptures have held up against the best criticisms of the last centuries. And while this is all very good, there's also, I've found, an unintended consequence here.

As we live to be understood, as we spend great efforts to be understood, I think it becomes, and in my experience, it's become harder and harder to stand out and to be different when indeed this is required of me.

We get quite used to living by the standards and assumptions of the prevailing culture. We get used to living defensively, apologetically. We live in the world and while we want, while we might want to not be of the world, we want to somehow find our place in the world.

we don't want to be seen as weirdos, extremists, or irrelevant. And so we do everything in our power to avoid being misunderstood. And yet the text confronts us with something this morning that at times it is God's will for you and for me at times that we will be misunderstood.

We could talk about tons of examples about how this is, but maybe a few. In our culture of the therapeutic where self-care is everything, where shame has no place, God calls us to a life of confession, to walk in repentance.

[18:06] As we gather as the church week in and week out and confess our sins that we're doing something deeply counter-cultural that will very much not be appreciated by the wider culture.

They'll say no need to go there, right? No need to get lost in shame and this negativity. No need to be honest about your sin.

Just try and kind of pretend, get past it, this sort of thing. It's amazing when you read the Psalms how counter-cultural these texts are. people that are lamenting their sins, grieving over their sins and there's something that the world sees in us and says that's not the way, that's not the way up, that's not the way to grow.

And yet of course we know that in Christ we follow him all the way down into his death in order to come up, back up with him into his life. in our workaholic culture obsessed with advancement and materialism God has called us to Sabbath rest to give up of our resources things that others will look at us and say you're wasting your time, you're wasting your efforts, life is hard enough, you don't need to spend your time with a bunch of strangers at church on a Sunday.

spend your efforts climbing the ladder, the fastest way to the highest pay is the way to the best life, yet God calls us to seek flourishing of the places in which we work, to slow down, to give up of our time and resources in all sorts of ways.

[19:54] This often will be misunderstood by those around us. We could go on. Opportunities for being misunderstood abound, spending time with Jesus' kinds of people, calling yourself a Christian.

For many people this will represent the patriarchy, colonialism, systemic oppression. You'll be seen by others to represent the worst sins of the church.

You'll be called anti-intellectual, bigoted, and while we can do our best to strive to represent Christ well and to explain and show a better way that at the end of the day we can't control all of this and we will be marked out in some of these ways.

And so why is it that God asks us of these things? Why does God ask us things that will be unintelligible to those around us? Things that will cost us friendships, things that will cost us jobs, honor, and we have to ask ourselves the question, is he being mean?

Is he wanting us to struggle? Perhaps this is a question you're struck with, disappointed with God, reflecting on the fact that this whole Christian walk is far harder than you thought it would be.

[21:20] reflecting on Joseph and his story, sure, Joseph meant, obedience for Joseph meant that being misunderstood and being judged was his reality, and of course there's no indication that Joseph would have been vindicated, publicly vindicated within his lifetime, and yet we have to reflect on the fact that Joseph gets to father the long-awaited Messiah, that Joseph had the honor of bestowing the name spoken to him from heaven, Jesus, to his son, the son of God, anticipating that this child will save God's people from their sins, that Joseph, well, taking the words of a song from a few decades ago, from Joseph's perspective, it says, Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter, how can I raise a king?

For Joseph, in his life, in his place in society, that this man got to raise Jesus, the Messiah, the son of God. And so we find an answer to our question, why does God go after us to live these lives that are quite challenging?

And I think the answer is this, that he doesn't just want us to struggle, he doesn't want us just to be disagreeable for the sake of it, he wants to lift us up from our small stories, he wants to lift us from our broken stories, our self-righteous stories, and he wants us to live with him and for him, unto him, for a far better story than we could ever come up with ourselves.

It's because of his love that he goes after us. The example of Joseph is set forth as an encouragement to each of us, that even though Joseph does not speak a single recorded word in the scripture, that this Joseph was appointed for something great.

God's word breaks into Joseph's story and tells him what to do. Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.

[23 : 41] For he will save his people from their sins. And we read that when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. From agony to resolve, from his small story to God's big story, he took the words to heart, do not fear, was the message from the angel and Joseph courageously put his full weight down on God's word.

He took his pregnant fiancee to be his wife. He did what was asked of him, despite its shame, to bring up one who would himself be ready to take on shame and disgrace of a much greater kind.

Jesus Christ followed the pattern set by his earthly father and delivered on the plan established before time with his heavenly father to take on our shame and disgrace and to save us from our sins.

That Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, has done this for you and for me. This, Jesus Christ, then sets the pattern for each of us to rise above our fear and to take on shame, misunderstanding, disbelief, inviting and equipping us to partake in God's great story.

And so the question we're asked with this morning, we're left with, is will you play your part? will you join in God's story? And who knows how God will use it in his greater story?

[25 : 13] I invite you to stand and we'll pray together. Yeah. Father, we're grateful for this, your word, we're thankful for this, for this familiar story, we're grateful for this example of Joseph.

Joseph, who did not stop at the prospect of shame, but went through with what you were calling him to do, and that he was blessed, and we're blessed by reflecting and being challenged by his story.

We ask that you, by the power of your spirit, would bring these words and this message into our hearts, that you'd make us courageous people, willing to follow you in all things, today and all days.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.