

Expecting Immanuel: Joseph

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, we thank you and we praise you because Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. We thank you for Joseph. We thank you for his example and for his faith.

And we pray, Father, that you will strengthen and aliven our faith, that we might serve Jesus, our Emmanuel, with gladness in all of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Please be seated. And I also want to wish you all a very blessed Advent too. I think that was the most exciting Advent lighting that I've ever seen.

And a very exciting start to this sermon series, which is called Great Expectations of All Things. It's a great name because it's great expectations that we have of Jesus, that Advent reminds us of. It's a season where we think of the great reality that Jesus will come again in great power and great judgment to make all things right forever.

[1 : 08] It is great because we build our lives around the amazing news that at Christmas, God comes to be with us as our rescuer in Jesus.

And it's great because through our repentance, God can do great things through us. Great expectations. And it's good for us to think in these terms of Advent because the only expression of Advent in our culture are calendars that have to do with consumption.

I don't know if you've seen this, but it's part of advertising more and more. So you have Advent calendars that advertise cars and car parts. I don't know if you know that.

There are Advent calendars that have little doors that have whiskey behind each one. In Vancouver, there are now Advent calendars that have marijuana behind each door too.

And this is true. And when we bought Advent calendars for our boys, all you could see was chocolate ones. And on the covers of the doors, there was not one mention of Jesus or anything to do with the Bible.

[2 : 20] There were lots of elves. There were lots of Santas and teddy bears and candy canes. But there was no Jesus. This is a very good example to us because Jesus is hidden in a season that is all about him.

He is hidden in a season that is about him. The Advent season and Christmas has actually become a season of consumption.

I mean, we know that. We've seen that for years. It is ironic and it hides the great expectation, the wonderful gift that Jesus became poor for us.

That by his poverty, we might become immensely wealthy. To have the treasure of the forgiveness of our sins.

To be rich in our new relationships as sons or daughters of God forever. And to have the invaluable gift of worshiping him. So today, we're going to look at God's word.

[3 : 27] God's word is wonderful because it takes away that veil. And instead, it puts a very bright spotlight on Jesus Christ so that we can all respond to him.

And this is a great gift to us at this time of year. So during the four Sundays of this Advent, our sermons are going to look at a number of people in the Bible around the time of Jesus' birth and how they responded to him.

And how they were shaped by his coming. Today, as you can see on the front of your bulletin, we're going to be thinking about Joseph. And that's who we heard about in our reading.

He is a marvelous picture and figure in the Bible. And the more I read and thought about him from Matthew 1 and 2, the more compelling Joseph is to us.

Because Jesus takes center stage in his life and he defines Joseph's life. Joseph is a profoundly good and wise man.

[4 : 28] And he responds decisively to God's word to him despite the incredible disruption it plays in his life. And I don't know if you know this about Joseph, but you never hear him speaking in the Bible.

He doesn't say one word. But his life, his actions speak a thousand words and more. He is an extraordinary man.

And the thing that you see with him is that he's a devoted man. He's deeply devoted to Mary. And to his God as well. And not only that, but he has a very messy life.

Yet God works very powerful in that messy life. And Joseph is vital to God's mission. So I think that if you have a messy life, if you face stressful situations and uncertainty and tough things in your life, you can relate to Joseph.

Joseph knows all about that. And we see this right away at verse 18. If you turn to Matthew 1.18, we're going to see Joseph here. Mary is betrothed to Joseph.

[5 : 43] This is a happy thing. It was a happy time in Joseph's life. He had found the woman that he would marry. He had this future ahead of him that was very, very bright.

And he was following a traditional two-stage marriage process that was traditional. He and Mary were betrothed, which meant a very strong engagement.

So that they were legally committed to one another. But they could not live together for a year. The only way to end that engagement, that year-long engagement, was a legal divorce.

That's how strong that engagement was. So this was a time for Joseph to prepare a home and to prove his loyalty and his chastity to Mary.

This was the purpose for this two-stage process in first century Palestine. And during that time, Mary stayed at her mother and father's home. But then everything goes wrong.

[6 : 45] Before stage two, when they would live together in full marriage, the Holy Spirit turns Joseph's life upside down. Mary tells Joseph that she is pregnant by God the Holy Spirit with one who will bring salvation.

Now, and you saw this announcement to Mary in Luke. But you can imagine what Joseph thought. He did not see that visit by the angel.

What was he feeling? Certainly unbelief. How could God miraculously cause you to become pregnant? How can I believe that? There would be betrayal and anger.

How could you commit adultery in this time of being engaged, of being married? How could you possibly do that? And there's this confusion. I thought I knew her.

There's shame. What will the community think of me? And there is deep loss for him. What are happening to our hopes that we had together?

[7 : 49] There is a devastation that Joseph is experiencing. And he can't overestimate this. And so he thought through this. He thought, what do I do? Well, Joseph was a just man, it says.

And which meant he was devoted to keeping God's law. And what did the law say? That this had to be dealt with in the community. It has to be something that the community has to come to terms with.

And so the law said that it had to be announced to the community in front of Mary's home that adultery had taken place. And the elders would decide what the punishment would be.

But the Bible says here also in verse 19 that he was unwilling to put her to shame. That he was merciful as well.

So despite the pain that he was going through, he decided to make a plan. He thought a lot about it. And he came up with this idea to minimize the damage to Mary by very quietly divorcing Mary.

[8 : 53] Which you could do with two or three witnesses. You could make a legal divorce. And maybe he could start a new life. There was a lot to be said for this plan.

It was noble. It was well thought through. It made the best of a very bad situation. But there was one thing missing. It didn't take into account the good news of Jesus Christ that was at the very center of all that was happening here.

And I wonder if that ever happens to you. Is it happening to you right now? Where you planned what to do about a difficult decision. Or a messy situation with no good outcome.

Or you have faced great loss in your life. All of which Joseph was facing too. But you didn't consider it from the perspective of the gospel.

Of the good news of Jesus Christ. It very easily happens. It happens to godly people like Joseph. It happens to people who have been Christians for a very long time. Joseph had a very hard time

hearing Mary's account.

[10:00] It was not realistic. It didn't make sense. It involved an unimaginable miracle. And even if you've been a Christian. Long, long time.

There are times when we are like Joseph at that moment. We don't see how the good news of God's saving work in Jesus comes into our messy lives. And actually surrounds those lives.

What does Jesus have to do with my family situation? With the decisions that I'm making now at work? With the loss I'm experiencing? We sort of say that unconsciously in our minds.

But at those times, we need to hear desperately God's voice telling us the good news. That Jesus surrounds all our messiness.

He surrounds all of our stresses and losses and pains. And we need to know that God has a plan of hope for us and for the world that is the great reality in the center of all our struggles.

[11:04] That's why we need to hear God's word every day. And every day to have revealed to us God's work in whatever we are facing that day.

Well, that's exactly what happens to Joseph in our reading today. One night, during this time of great planning and thinking this through, Joseph had an extraordinary dream as he slept.

And you can see that in the next verse. By the way, there's only 21 dreams in all the Bible. I don't know if you knew that. Six of those dreams are in the New Testament.

And four of those six happen to Joseph. It happens to Joseph. Well, in this dream, an angel tells him five things.

He says, first of all, don't fear taking Mary as your wife. And you and I all face fears in our lives. We know about this. The most frequent command in the Bible is do not be afraid.

[12:08] That's what is said by far most frequently. And always, it comes with a call to do something risky for God that rests upon God's promise or what he is already doing.

And this is a call for us in our own lives. There's a call to us in this to always replace our fears, which will come to us with a trust in God and his promises and his work in your life now.

So what does Joseph trust God for here? What is he being called to trust him for? Well, the angel says, trust the fact that what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Wow. What this is being called to trust is that Mary's pregnancy is a miraculous work by the Holy Spirit. And by the way, we are to understand that there's no physical intercourse as pagan religions talk about and as Muslims misunderstand often about Christianity, about gods and humans having intercourse.

It is God's amazing, creative, miraculous work inside of Mary. And not only is this miraculously done by God's work, but third, the angel says she will give birth to a son.

[13:37] So that Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem, is a profound miracle in which God is both fully God, in which Jesus is fully God and fully human.

This baby born in Bethlehem, this helpless baby, is completely divine with all of God's power and might and yet fully human.

How can we wrap our minds around this? This is why God's word has to come to Joseph and to us. And fourthly, the angel says, you, Joseph, shall call his name Jesus.

And that word has deep meaning to it. It means God saves. It's a very common name in the Bible. It comes from Joshua.

But it means that God saves and it is perfectly fulfilled in this person. Why? Why does he call him God saves? Well, it's the fifth thing that the angel says.

[14:33] He will save his people from their sin. Well, here's the fundamental problem for all of humanity. It is human sin and evil in this world.

Mary and Joseph knew that sin. You know, Joseph did not believe Mary. Mary was hurt. There was a difficult time in their relationship here. Sin is at the heart of the small things in our life that separate us from each other and God and the very big things.

All you have to do is look at the world. This is an empirically verifiable truth. We see that in the relationship of the world to North Korea.

We see that in the abuse of powerful people through sexual harassment of those who are under them. And God is calling Joseph to become part of the crucial event in human history where that fundamental problem is dealt with.

That this tiny baby growing inside of Mary is the only true hope of the world. Only Jesus can save people from that problem.

[15 : 41] Whether they are Julius Caesar. Whether they are these very unknown two people, young people in Palestine. Whether it is anybody in all of creation.

All of them have this need for Jesus to save them. And so he is born to die on a cross to offer the only sacrifice powerful enough for all people to come to him.

And that's why this birth is so important. Because that sacrifice needs both to identify with us in our sin. But also to be God.

Because the salvation has to come from God. So Jesus alone can offer the atonement that is powerful enough to forgive all sin.

It can only be Jesus, God and man, that can do this. And that good news of rescue is what surrounds Joseph's anguish.

[16 : 41] And it's the same good news that surrounds both the successes and the very difficult and messy things in your life. If you have trusted Jesus to forgive your sin, this is the gift that God gives to you.

That good news surrounds you. And the profound and practical meaning of that salvation, what it means to us really, is in verses 22 and 23.

Because those verses tell us that God had a plan from the very beginning. This is what Jeremy was talking about in the children's talk. To save humanity. Why?

So that they could be with him. That's what that idea of family means that we were talking about.

That God would be with us. And we would be with him as his people.

He promised this hundreds of years before by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus will be Emmanuel. God with us. God made man. God with us. Amen. That theme runs through all of Matthew.

[17 : 44] And by the way, we're going to be going through Matthew as a sermon series in the year to come. But that theme of God with us is the theme of Matthew. It's said clearly here. And then at the very end of Matthew, the last words are Jesus telling his followers, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, that he is God.

Go make disciples of all nations. Behold, I am with you to the end of the age. I am with you. And so what Joseph discovered was that his life, with all its messiness, was surrounded by God's glorious plan for him and for the world in Jesus.

God was with him, saving him. And the wonderful thing about Joseph is that his response to that news is immediate. He took the risk and did exactly as the angel said.

So verses 24 and 25 says he threw his plans out. He took Mary as his wife. He named his child Jesus, you know, adopting him in that process. A lot of inconveniences, a lot of gossip and troubles would come with that decision.

But at the same time, that decision meant that with Mary, he had the gift of Jesus with him. Always. No one other than Mary in this world spent more time physically with Jesus than Joseph did.

[19 : 13] And that's a physical way of expressing how Jesus is with us as we respond in faith to God's word to us. Joseph experienced the joy of what it meant to have Emmanuel God with him through much of his life physically.

And in the same way, this God with us means that God never leaves us, never forsakes us in all of life. And I want to come away from this passage with a couple of practical things.

Joseph and the way that he responded to the good news of Jesus has a deep relevance for us. And I just want to pick out a couple of things that are relevant to us. There are many here.

But the first thing is that his obedience to God's word was a really important, crucial part of God's plan for saving the world. In fact, it could not have happened otherwise.

Joseph was a very insignificant person. He was a carpenter by trade. He had no power. He was not a leader. He had very few possessions. But notice that in the dream, the angel calls Joseph the son of David.

[20 : 29] That's the only time in all of the Bible where somebody is called son of David other than Jesus. This is in the New Testament. And it's a clear reminder that the right of King David's throne passed through Joseph.

So Joseph's ready obedience and his repentance from his original plans actually makes Jesus his legal son. And it makes Jesus a descendant of David.

That fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that God has planned a rescue that would come through the descendant of King David.

And there was a promise there that that kingdom would be a kingdom that would be eternal, an everlasting kingdom. Joseph would never have imagined that he would play a part in that plan. Now, the same thing is true for us. That your ready obedience is crucial in God's plan of saving people in this world.

[21 : 34] If you have been saved by Jesus, then he brings you into that everlasting kingdom. And 1 Peter 2.9 says that now you are a chosen race. You're a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

Why? Why? That you might proclaim the excellencies of him, Jesus, who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light.

You see, God's purpose is for you to proclaim Jesus in your own unique way. And in the new year, we're going to be meeting a number of times as a congregation to encourage one another in how we can better proclaim the excellencies of Jesus.

God does have a plan for you. He calls you, as he called Joseph, to take risks for the sake of Jesus' glory and to be part of this plan of rescue in the world.

So that's the first thing. Your obedience is crucial in God's message, in his mission. And then finally and secondly, the Christian life is very messy.

[22 : 43] It's full of inconvenience. The gospel really disrupted Joseph's life. Yet that is the context that God works his powerful saving work.

It is in your messiness. It is in your inconvenience. Joseph went through the anguish of a time of not knowing the truth of Mary's pregnancy.

That was a time where he did not know. He also endured the ridicule of neighbors who knew Mary gave birth very early on in their marriage. And in the next chapter of Matthew, he and his family become refugees.

They have to go to Egypt and live there for years in order to escape Herod from killing Jesus. It meant poverty. It meant uncertainty. Yet he readily obeyed.

C.S. Lewis was once asked a question. I love the answer to it. The question was, which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness?

[23 : 44] That's the question he was asked. And he responded in this way. He said, well, actually, as it lasts, the religion of worshiping oneself is the best.

He said, I have an elderly acquaintance of about 80 who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years and is, more or less, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know.

And as you perhaps know, I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of port would do that.

But if you want a religion that makes you feel really comfortable, I certainly do not recommend Christianity. That's true. Because like Joseph, the good news of Jesus Christ really calls us out of our comfort zone and to live inconveniently for his glory.

And this is so completely opposite to the consumer mindset of our culture. We take the risk of obeying him because he saved us and he loves you forever, not because it will make us comfortable.

[24 : 57] This gospel says that Jesus comes into your messiness and he says, come, follow me, take your part in the plan of rescue. You have the right to be my minister, Jesus says, and to serve.

Jesus is with you and you can take risks for him. This is what Joseph is telling us. So that is why we speak even haltingly about our reason for believing in him.

We reach out in his name to those around us, even in our tiredness and our vulnerability. We love our neighbors when we are not at our best. Why?

For his sake, for his glory. God says to you, as he said to Joseph, do not be afraid. Don't be afraid to take the step of faith. Don't fear serving him in costly ways because you will see God's power working perfectly in your weakness.

His power working in you can do infinitely more than you could ask or imagine. God uses even those little decisions of risk in our lives for good that we cannot imagine.

[26 : 06] So let us leave this passage knowing with Joseph that Jesus is your Emmanuel. He is God with you. And that means everything.

God's presence in your life is worth the greatest inconvenience. But it is also the greatest gift that can never be taken away. He brings us into his life now.

He makes us part of his mission today. And that is because in Jesus, it is absolutely certain that nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And he will come again. And we will see him as he is. May God the Holy Spirit strengthen us to live for his glory. Amen.