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Matthew 1:18-25

Peace in Our Home

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Matthew 1:18-25 Common English Bible

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means “God with us.”). When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn’t have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

The last few weeks we have been talking about finding peace. Today we talk about finding peace in our home with our relationships. We read the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel a few weeks ago, when we talked about finding peace in our past. We lifted up the women who are named in the genealogy of Jesus. Each of them knew pain and hardship. They had been called unclean or sinners and God used them and God blessed them and God blessed their children.

Some of us have been through experiences that we thought were the end of our life. Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that our lives are not defined by our worst moment. God redeems us and blesses us and uses us to bring about good in the world.[[1]](#footnote-2)

In the scripture that we read today, we have a peek into Mary and Joseph’s relationship. Joseph is this silent figure, there is nothing that Joseph says that is attributed to him in the Bible. Mary and Joseph are engaged and Mary becomes pregnant and all Joseph knows is he is not the father.

At that time Jewish marriages were usually arranged by the parents, sometimes when the bride and groom were still children. When the young girl was 12 a formal engagement would take place and the father of the groom would pay a certain sum to the father of the bride called the bride price. This bride price could be as large as the price of a home. A portion of that was given to the bride. If her husband died or divorced her, it would become something like what we call alimony. In addition to this amount, the groom himself would give the bride an additional sum. This, too, she was to keep if the man died or divorced her. The groom’s family would also have given expensive gifts to the bride’s family. This was all part of the engagement.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Then a contract was prepared in which the groom made certain legal promises to the bride before at least two witnesses. The contract said that the husband would provide for his wife, and stipulated that if he ever divorced her, or died, she was to keep the bride price and the additional sum from the groom that had been given to her and her family at their engagement. These were carefully prepared by the scribes as legally binding documents. If a husband divorced his wife and did not ensure that she left with her bride price and additional sum, a lien would be placed against his property. The only way a man could legally break an engagement, and reclaim the money, was if the woman had been unfaithful to him.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Upon the signing of the legal contract, the bride and groom were legally husband and wife. They could not sleep together until the actual wedding ceremony, but if either slept with another during this period of time they would be considered adulterers.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Mary and Joseph are at this point in their relationship and Mary comes to tell Joseph that she is pregnant and Joseph knows that he is not the father. I can just imagine the pain, anguish and sense of betrayal that is running through Joseph’s mind. To make matters worse, Mary says that she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We assume that Joseph didn’t believe Mary because the scripture tells us he decided to call off their engagement quietly. Remember their engagement was legally binding so Joseph had to divorce Mary. If he did that publicly he would be calling her out as an adulterer and she would be publicly scorned and humiliated or worse. Deuteronomy 22:20-21 says that when an engaged woman cheats on her bridegroom before they are married, “The city’s elders will bring the young woman to the door of her father’s house. The citizens of that city must stone her until she dies because she acted so sinfully in Israel by having extramarital sex while still in her father’s house.” It doesn’t seem like Joseph thinks that Mary will be stoned, but she would be branded as a sinner and the bride price and additional money given by Joseph would be given back to his family.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Joseph chose a different way. He chose mercy. He would divorce her quietly and tell everyone that he changed his mind. And Mary’s pregnancy would become obvious and people would assume Joseph was the father and Joseph would be seen as the one who would be publicly scorned and humiliated. But Mary would be able to financially support her child and her dignity would be intact. And no one would be stoned.

 Joseph felt like he had been wronged but he didn’t show retaliation. Instead he showed mercy and forgiveness and grace. This is a story for me that reminds us that God works through broken, human people and forgiveness, compassion and mercy is always the better choice when we have been wronged. Finding peace in our home, finding peace in our relationships is about choosing to forgive when we have been wronged.

 I love that just as Joseph has decided what to do, an angel from the Lord comes to him in a dream and the angel says, “don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid. Doing what you think is right is scary. Doing mercy and forgiving and giving and receiving grace is scary. It is easier to cast someone aside as being completely in the wrong. The angel says, “do not be afraid.”

 Imagine those months of pregnancy for Mary and Joseph. They weren’t filled with joy and baby showers, rather they were filled with uncomfortable silences and lots of anxiety. To other people it might have looked like Mary and Joseph were the perfect couple, but they were probably struggling to hold it all together. Each one of us in this place is struggling in some way. There might be discord in your family or you might feel disconnected from your spouse or your friends. You might be consumed with worry about the future or feel really lonely and afraid. Some of you are looking for jobs or trying to find the perfect relationship. Some of us are looking for a sense of meaning and purpose to our lives.[[6]](#footnote-7)

 This is the time of year when we are supposed to be joyful and filled with the Christmas spirit, but there is also a lot of heartache in this place at this moment.[[7]](#footnote-8) And we wonder how we can be righteous. We ask, “Is it faithful to be struggling?” May we remember that we are never alone. This community is always here for you. Turning to God for help is always a good thing. And if both parties of a relationship are willing to try, then counseling can always help. Counseling can help you figure out what happened and what can be done to heal a relationship. Making a relationship work takes commitment to each another on both sides. We are also called to practice forgiveness. Forgiveness is the decision to see other people as flawed human beings, and to let go of the idea of revenge when someone has hurt us.[[8]](#footnote-9)

 May we remember that God worked through real people with real challenges. God became flesh in Jesus through an unwed young girl and a man who doubted and questioned but who wanted to do the right thing. Of course, he needed an angel to visit him in a dream to show him how to choose mercy and forgiveness and grace.

 They will call Jesus Emmanuel, which means God with us. God with us as we are, not as we know we should be, not as we are trying to be or have promised to be or will be some day, but God with us as we are right now.[[9]](#footnote-10) God is with us and uses us for good and accepts us as we are and helps us to choose forgiveness and mercy and grace. We are called to be people who are gracious and merciful. People who wish good and not evil, even on those who have hurt us. And by doing that, we find life.[[10]](#footnote-11) Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Paragraph taken from Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Paragraph taken from Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Paragraph taken from Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/legal contractmid to the bride re gracious and merciful. People who wish good and not eveil, even e or will be some day, but G [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Rev. Adam Hamilton in his sermon, “Whose Child is This?” http://cor.org/leawood/gps-guide/raising-a-child-not-your-own [↑](#footnote-ref-11)