

Matthew 1: 18 – 24 “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about”

This reading comes very nicely packaged.

Mary was found to be with child. Joseph was not the father of the expected child, so, being a good Jewish man, he planned to quietly leave Mary because the commandments did not allow infidelity. But an angel appeared to him in a dream and made an outrageously unbelievable announcement. Thereupon, Joseph awoke and did as the angel of the Lord commanded. He took his betrothed into his home – and they lived happily ever after.

Good, heartwarming story ... all the pieces fit neatly together with a happy ending ... but from a human perspective, we know there must have been so much more to this part of the story. As unfathomable and impossible it must have been for Mary to hear and fully comprehend Gabriel’s message that through the Holy Spirit she was to carry and give birth to the Son of God – it must have been just as incomprehensible for Joseph to grasp the truth of what he saw and heard in his dream. Things like that just don’t happen in real life. Both of them must have wrestled hard for quite some time with out-of-control roller-coasting feelings, emotions and thoughts until their minds and hearts caught up with what they heard and enabled them to be at peace with the message. I don’t think either of them would have simply received their respective messages and said “Oh, OK.”

Let’s look deeper. We learn from the Gospel that Joseph was a **good** man, a **righteous** man. Even if he and Mary had an arranged betrothal, it must have been heart-breaking for Joseph to think that she had relations with someone else ... and what else **could** he think because that would have been the natural course of such things.

We don’t know much about Joseph; if he had been a drinking man, he might have wanted to seek out his friends at the nearest tavern and try to make some sense of this with them. But the Gospel tells us that Joseph was an **honorable** man, a man of integrity. He wouldn’t shame Mary by talking badly about her. In spite of that, because he was also a good Jewish man following the commandments, he could not stay with her.

Now humanly, we all know that ending relationships is not an easy thing to do. At one point or another in our lives, all of us have run across difficult times

with friends or family. We know the heart doesn't let go of caring for people even when circumstances change the relationship. So if Joseph was human like us, he must have been feeling a whole range of emotions: anger, maybe, ... disappointment, hurt, embarrassment, a heavy heart holding deep sadness.

He might have even done some deep soul-searching, trying to remember if anything he had done would cause sweet Mary to betray him.

Then the dream. Can you imagine hearing the words, *"It is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived."*?

Think about that. Imagine the questions that must have stirred up in the minds of both Mary and Joseph when they received their messages. *"How is this possible? What does this mean?"* And there would have been no answers; there would have been no reference for knowing and understanding what parenting the Son of God would mean.

We know that God can work miracles in unimaginable ways. But I think this story also raises questions for us that have meaning for our own lives:

First of all, what would have enabled Mary and Joseph to come to the point of accepting and saying yes to the astounding enigmatical messages they heard?

I think both Mary and Joseph must have been strong people of faith, embracing Old Testament scriptures and prophecies and the customs of Jewish belief, not just at that moment, but all their lives. Their lives might have been hard, but centered simply around family and God, uncomplicated by all the distractions we live with now.

Joseph was probably already well-established in his carpenter craft, with a good head on his shoulders and the wisdom teachings of the elders to guide him about how to respect, provide for and care for family.

Mary was younger, but would have been raised to do all the things it took to take care of household needs. Her days would have been filled with family responsibilities and prayers.

They would have been simple, hard-working people, God-fearing people living close to earth and nature, living by the work of their hands ... resilient people with gratitude for daily blessings ... virtuous people who relied on God, talked with God, even ranted at God, trusted and depended on the providence of God every day, with the confidence that God would answer their prayers. For them it may **not** have been all that strange to have signs and angels appear in their dreams. Deeply immersed in God's friendship, they most likely lived with the belief that with God all things were possible ... even things that didn't humanly make sense.

So after struggles to wrap their minds around what they were being asked, perhaps their strong, all-embracing faith and reassuring trust in the wisdom of God enabled them to accept their part in the unfolding of God's mysterious plan for which there was no understanding.

The second question I have for us to consider is this:

God gives us freedom of will. How would **our lives** be different today if instead of Mary's *"Let it be done to me according to your Word"* she had said *"Thank you so very much for considering me. I feel honored, but I don't really think I can do that."*

And what if Joseph had taken his dream to be nothing more than just a wild dream brought on by something he ate instead of a real message for him to receive and accept?

Good things come to those who wait ... if Mary and Joseph had not said "Yes," we would still be waiting; there would be no Christianity. We would be celebrating Hanukkah and Passover and Days of Atonement. We would be joining our Jewish ancestors and relatives in waiting unending centuries for the advent of the Messiah **still** to come.

Fortunately for us, for our ancestors and for all Christians everywhere, God was real enough and present enough in the lives of Mary and Joseph to give them the courage to rely on their faith **and** - without knowing the personal

consequences and hardships they would have to endure in the future - say "Yes," thus changing the world for all time.

And, fortunately for us, God intervened when righteous Joseph had plans to divorce Mary. How often do we think we can control our own lives, think we have all the answers, think **our** plans will make all things right ... and maybe, just maybe, God has something better in mind?

Maybe the great messages for us in this simple Gospel are: Listen to your dreams ... pay attention to the prophets in your lives ... get out of the way and let God be God ... thank God every day for his wondrous, miraculous ways of showing great love for us ... Be ready to say "Yes!" ... and then, enjoy the ride trusting in **God's** plans and see what amazing things can happen if you do.

Emmanuel – God is with us now and forever. Amen
Thanks be to God.

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