

# “The Angel Appears”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 18, 2022*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Psalm 72:1-7, 17-18

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Matthew 1:18-25

Some contend that the jury is still out on whether Joseph actually *was* a “righteous” man. They think maybe he should have explored other options; that he did not really need to dismiss Mary from their engagement, even if done quietly; that such an action would have condemned Mary (and her child) to a lifetime of economic and emotional distress.

Most of us don’t know enough about first-century marriage customs to offer a helpful judgment. Mary and Joseph’s upcoming wedding had likely been arranged; their betrothal may have lasted a long time, either until Mary was only enough to wed, or Joseph had completed an apprenticeship or prepared a home where they could live together. What we can imagine, though, is the distress; the sense of betrayal, disappointment, and other emotions that Joseph must have experienced; as well as the fear and hurt that Mary would have likely also felt when this unexpected pregnancy infused such complexity in their relationship.

We are not used to this. We’re accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus; of stables and shepherds, silent nights and guiding stars. But, let’s not forget that Mary and Joseph are not merely characters from a stain-glass window or wooden nativity, but real people. And the more we see them as real people – people like us, with challenging ups and downs in their relationships, for example – the more we might imagine ourselves as people like them; that is, people who go through all kinds of things – some quite difficult – and yet can still be utilized to accomplish God’s purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary is the primary human actor in the story of Jesus’ birth. The focus is on her passive acceptance of what is happening to her: “let it be with me according to your word” Mary says to the visiting angel of the Lord. Matthew selects Joseph as the leading actor to highlight the active

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Dear Working Preacher”

component in our human response to God. Joseph never speaks a word in the gospel, but his actions are crucial to God's work of salvation through Jesus.

Matthew is clear about what Joseph's role is *not*. He will not be the biological father of Jesus. As the angel explains in his dream, the child has been conceived of the Holy Spirit. And yet, vital to God's plan is for Jesus to be an accepted part of the family of David. For the plan to succeed, Joseph must play an active, irreplaceable role: Joseph must have a change of heart and agree to be the father of a child that is not his own.

Righteousness is an important theme in Matthew's gospel. Being righteous includes law observance, but it is not a slavish adherence to the letter of the law. Joseph, being a righteous man, was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace and planned instead to dismiss her quietly. Joseph, being righteous, has mercy and compassion toward Mary, and thus planned to end their betrothal without submitting her to public humiliation.

After the angels visit, Joseph – being righteous – risks disobedience to the letter of the law in order to respond to God's call. He risks shame and scandal by taking Mary as his wife and adopting her son as his own. He travels an uncertain path that challenges conventional norms.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's initial understanding of righteousness created an obstacle to God's plan. Thus, God acts to remove this obstacle. The angel that comes in the night proposes a resolution to the dilemma that human reason had failed to discern. Author Alyce McKenzie invites us to imagine what words the angel may have spoken to Joseph:

*Believe her unbelievable story. Marry her, accept this child into your family, and become the father of God's child.*

*He will need a father as he grows into manhood, not just any father, but one like you, one who will teach him to take risks like the one you are about to take, for he will be tempted not to take them.*

*He will need a father like you to teach him to withstand the disapproval of others, as you will soon have to withstand it. He will need a father like you to teach him what to do in situations like this one, when all hope seems lost and only pain remains, and to model how to believe the unbelievable good news and to walk ahead in faith.*

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

*If you do not walk the hard road to Bethlehem, who will teach him how to climb the cruel hill to Calvary?<sup>3</sup>*

If Joseph has been suffering, it's hard to imagine that Mary comes through all of this unscathed. She likely understood the unexpected pain that her pregnancy caused her betrothed and, if she sensed his intentions, would likely have had cause for concern herself. It's probably safe to say that the months leading up to Christ's birth were not blissful and calm for this couple but, instead, fraught with the kind of anxiety and concern we have all experienced at various times.

Each of us have gone through similar upheavals. Some of the people sitting around you today – or who will join in this worship service virtually – are likely struggling with discord or feeling disconnected from family members. Young people are wondering what future they may have, elders are facing the same question from a different point of view. People are encountering challenges to their health, in their jobs, or may be seeking some sense of acceptance or worth.

One week away from Christmas, there are many feelings of anticipation, excitement, and hope to be celebrated. But, at this time of year, people are also experiencing heartache that needs to be acknowledged. It can sometimes feel downright embarrassing to be struggling; we might even wonder if that painful anguish is unfaithful.

All of this helps flesh out the additional name, “Emmanuel” that Matthew draws from the prophet Isaiah to apply to Jesus. God *is* with us – God is coming to be with us where we are, as we are. Not as we are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but as we are now, in this moment. Maybe that is the promise at the heart of this passage – at the heart of Matthew's birth story – that as God once came to be with, to accept, to bless, and to use Joseph and Mary – even in all their anguish and messiness – so God comes to be with us, to accept us as we are, to bless us, and to use us for good.

Matthew tells us that when Joseph awoke from his dream, he “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” This means that he did the righteous thing: he takes the compassionate action by taking Mary as his wife and naming the child Jesus – which means “God saves” – and adopting him fully into his family. Joseph acted in a manner that was not expected within the prevalent system of honor and shame of his day, risking rumor and reputation for the quiet roles of husband and father. His actions speak louder than his words. As Thomas Long says:

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<sup>3</sup> Alyce McKenzie, “Matthew” from *Interpretation Bible Studies*

*Joseph becomes...a model for the Christian life. He learns that being truly righteous does not mean looking up a rule in a book and then doing the “right thing,” it means wrestling with the complexities of a problem, listening for the voice of God, and then doing God’s thing.<sup>4</sup>*

As this Advent season of anticipation and preparation, waiting and longing nears its end, we consider how this story of the incarnation – God coming to be with us as one of us, putting on human flesh and blood and moving into the neighborhood – becomes our story, as well. These humble, human agents – Mary and Joseph, respectively, the biological and adoptive parents of Jesus – show us how God’s will on our lives is both passively accepted and an active response. While we may not know, much less fully understand, God’s plan for our lives, we each can follow a path of righteousness. Despite all the obstacles that might appear – what effort we may need to invest in our relationships, or how it might make us look in the eyes of others – we can choose the way of compassion.

As Joseph chose to be present with his adopted son, he modeled God’s choice to be present with us in Jesus. By his acceptance of and obedience to God’s plan, Joseph allowed his son to fulfill the mission implied by his twin names: God saves; God is with us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Long, “Matthew,” *Westminster Bible Companion*