

Unexpected Parents (1:18-25)

Each year since I've lived in Knoxville, a local theater company puts on a production called *The Unusual Tale of Mary & Joseph's Baby*.¹ As you might guess from the name, it is a play based on the story of Christmas from the bible. And I mean it when I say it is *fantastic*. *Highly* worth going to. It takes a few artistic liberties with the story—as any good art would. But they all add *to* the story, not take *away* from it. For instance, there's a scene where Mary's loudmouth cousin accidentally lets it slip to Joseph that Mary is *pregnant*, and then hilariously tries to play it off. *Very* entertaining. There's humor and intrigue sprinkled in so well throughout the production.

But it also sticks amazingly *close* to the biblical narrative. And one of the *things I love most about it* is how it helps to *humanize* the story. I think something we can lose sight of when we read and talk about the story of Christmas year-in and year-out, is that this was something that happened to *real people*. Real people that didn't have the advantage of hindsight like we do. They didn't know how it all would turn out for good in the end. They had to experience the story as it *happened*. With real emotion and confusion and frustration and even *fear*. And I think the play does a good job showing that. And so this week as we continue in our Matthew series and look at the story of Christmas, I want to try and do so in that vein. **I want to help us not just *hear* the story of Mary and Joseph, but actually *experience* it.** Are you willing to try and do that with me?

Love it. So if you've got a bible, *turn with me* to **Matthew 1**. Last week, Marcus kicked us off by teaching through the genealogy—also known as the very long list of ancient names that most of us skip in our bible reading plans. This week, we hop right into the story. Pick it up with me in v. 18:

[18] This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Stop there with me for a moment. So there are *several ideas* in that first verse that we need to unpack for us to grasp what's happening in the story. First, let's talk about that phrase, "*pledged to be married.*" That refers to a practice among Jewish people at the time we might call *betrothal*. It was a *little* like a modern engagement, but much more official. Basically, Mary and Joseph were already *legally* married—such that it required a

¹ This year they're just doing the music from the production, but you can find info and tickets for it [here](#).

legal divorce to break off the betrothal, as we'll see later. But even though they were *legally* married, they couldn't yet live together, sleep together, or usually, even spend much *time alone* together for an entire year leading up to the wedding. I should *clarify at this point that I am not advocating* for this particular approach to marriage, just *informing you of how it worked back then*.

But *during this year*, Joseph would go and *prepare a home* for him and Mary, and then there would be a wedding ceremony where they would "*come together*" in the language of the passage, be officially married, and go and live in the home he had prepared for them. So the way Matthew describes their situation in this passage means that they're in that year before the ceremony.

And that's *where it gets a little complicated*. Because we're told that it was at that point, that Mary was "found to be pregnant" via the Holy Spirit. Now *that*, to me, is a very matter-of-fact way of saying what I can only imagine was a very difficult situation to be in. In the *gospel of Luke*, there's a whole scene where an angel appears to Mary, tells her what is going to happen and why, and she responds with questions, and then gratitude and worship—it's like a whole thing.² *Matthew's* gospel simply tells us, "she was found to be pregnant via the Holy Spirit." Matthew apparently, just a tad less detail-oriented than Luke was.

So *briefly*, let's address this whole idea of a *virgin becoming pregnant*. As modern people, I think sometimes we tend to scoff at a detail like that. We hear it and go, "this story really expects me to believe that virgins get pregnant?" And I understand the hang-up. But at the same time, **I would point out that the bible doesn't expect you to believe that virgins get pregnant; it expects you to believe that *this* one did.** Do you hear the difference? So yes, it's an unusual and difficult thing to believe. But that's kind of the *point*. Nobody believed it when it *happened* either. *Joseph* doesn't believe it until an angel appears to him in a dream and essentially goes "yeah my man—I know what you're thinking. But this is for real." That's the Kent translation of that verse, but you guys get the point.

So, this is where I'm going to ask you to *think about the story like you're in it*, and not like you already know how it all ends. So *ladies*, why don't y'all go first. Imagine with me: you are engaged to be married to a great guy, but you haven't so much as held hands with him yet. And you certainly haven't participated in any of the typical activities with him (or

² See Luke 1:26-38, 46-55.

anyone else) that would result in a person becoming pregnant. *But* you've been told by an angel—which apparently is a thing—that you are going to *become* miraculously pregnant anyway. And pretty soon, your body starts to show signs that you are, in fact, pregnant. And you're about to have to walk around, very pregnant, in a hyper-conservative society—not to mention a fairly small town where most everybody knows you, your parents, Joseph, and Joseph's parents. And to every person who asks, stares, or shoots a judgy glance your way, the only answer you'll be able to give them about your pregnancy is “don't worry, it's not what it looks like. It's from the Holy Spirit.” How are you feeling about this particular scenario? Excited? Exhilarated? So you see the difficulty of the situation.

Okay, **men in the room**: you get to go next. You're engaged to be married to an incredible woman. ~~But you haven't gotten to be around her much because you're busy getting your housing squared away for after the wedding.~~ You haven't spent a singular moment alone with her. But you get together with her, probably in a public setting with others around, to sync up on how everything's going, and right after you have your delightful hummus and tea with her, she stops you and goes, “oh Joseph: one more quick update to run by you before you go...I'm a little *pregnant*.” Men, how are we feeling about *that* situation? Not great, right? How do you think *you'd* respond?

I can tell you one thing **your response likely isn't** going to be. It's probably *not* going to be, “oh, how lovely! I can only imagine this child is God incarnate, who you are carrying by immaculate conception, such that we will go down in the history books as the parents of the son of God. How fortunate are we to be in this situation! ~~I'll order the birth announcements and mail them out to our friends! And don't worry Mary, if my parents are confused or outraged, I'll be sure to tell them the baby is from the Holy Spirit. They'll understand.~~”

I know **that isn't how Joseph responded**, partly, because I have met human beings before in my life, and I know that's not how *any* of them would respond. But I also know because of what comes next in the passage. Look with me at v. 19:

[19] Because Joseph her husband was *faithful to the law*, and yet did *not* want to expose her to *public disgrace*, he had in mind to divorce her *quietly*.

In other words, **Joseph is headed for the door** ~~as far as this relationship goes.~~ Like anyone would do. // *But* he's going to go about it *compassionately*. We're told that he is “*faithful to the law*,” and also that he “*didn't want to expose [Mary] to public disgrace*.”

Here's **what all of that means**. If a man like Joseph found out his wife-to-be was unfaithful (which at this point in the story, is everyone's assumption), there wasn't really an option for him to just forgive her and continue with the wedding. That's just not how things worked. Jewish law *required* him to get a divorce (which, remember, was necessary to break off even a betrothal). Additionally, if he knew she was unfaithful and *didn't* divorce her, *Roman* law said *Joseph* could be tried in court for exploiting his wife as a prostitute. So this is a high stakes situation for Joseph. **It's not just "do I forgive her for the suspected infidelity, or not forgive her?" It's "do I make my life a living nightmare because of this pregnancy, or do the very normal, expected thing and break off the relationship?"**

And **what most men would do** in this situation is take their future wife to court, have her legally charged with adultery, and make a big to-do out of it all. If successful, it would publicly shame her and her family, and all-but *guarantee* that she remained single the rest of her life. **But**, the story tells us, Joseph didn't want to do that. He didn't "want to expose her to public disgrace." In other words, he *was* going to do what the law required (divorce), but he *wasn't* going to do it *publicly* or *maliciously*. He was going to do it *quietly*, and *privately* to spare her any unnecessary shame. Tells us a lot about the type of guy Joseph was.

But even **those plans** are about to be **interrupted** by God. Look with me at v. 20:

[20] *But after he had considered this* (meaning, after he had made plans to divorce her), *an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."*

In other words, the angel tells Joseph that Mary *wasn't unfaithful* to him; she's in the process of being *faithful* to the calling God has placed on her. The calling to give birth to the Messiah—the long-awaited king and deliverer of God's people. And because of all of this, the angel says, Joseph should not "be afraid."

Now, I don't know if you've **ever found yourself in a situation** where you are needing to tell someone else *not* to be afraid. I am the father of a six and a three year old, so I'm in that situation approximately four times a day...per kid. And here's what I've noticed: if I'm telling my kids *not* to be afraid, it's usually because they are *currently* afraid. Or at least because they are entering into a situation that will likely *result* in them *being* afraid. Right? Rarely do I tell my kids "not to be afraid" right before they sit down on the couch

with a snack to watch their favorite episode of *Bluey*. I tell them not to be afraid when I think they will likely *become* afraid.

Okay. **So it seems likely that**, if Joseph is being told *not* to be afraid, it's because the thing he's being asked to do might in fact be *fear-inducing*. Right? Continuing in a relationship where there is suspected infidelity, or at bare minimum, *assumed* infidelity by everyone else *around* them. Putting *himself* in social and legal jeopardy by *not* going through with the required divorce. *Mary* having to navigate the stares, and whispers, and judgment coming her way at nearly every moment she's out in public, pregnant. And all of that is *on top of* just the normal amount of fear and uncertainty around *becoming* first-time *parents*, not to mention doing so in a hand-to-mouth society without many of the modern luxuries *we* have today.

So **to put it mildly**, there are quite a few things in this scenario that could be generating *fear*—or at least, *anxiety*, for Mary and Joseph. But the angel tells them *not* to be afraid, and here's *why*. Look with me at v. 21. Remember, this is still the angel speaking to Joseph in a dream:

[21] *She* (Mary) will give birth to a son, and *you* (Joseph) are to give him the name *Jesus*, because he will *save his people from their sins*."

A little background here: **the name *Jesus*** in Hebrew literally means "God saves." Which means Matthew's sentence is actually a play on words. Translated into English, it would sound something like this: "you are to give him the name 'God saves,' because *he will save his people from their sins*." But that means this sentence has a pronoun problem: namely, who does "*he*" refer to in that sentence? *Who* is going to save, exactly—God? Or Jesus? Is *God* going to save? Or is "God saves" going to save? See the issue?

And **the answer is...?** Yes. They *both* will be doing the saving, because they are one in the same. So here we have Matthew, for one of the first times in his book, alluding to the true *identity* of Jesus. Jesus *is* God, who has come to save humanity from their sins. Sometimes I hear people say things like "well Jesus never *claimed to be* God—Christians made that up years and years later to try and consolidate power for themselves. The problem with that is that it's in his very *name*. Jesus *is* "God saves."

And just **in case that idea was at all ambiguous** from the name *Jesus*, it becomes even *clearer* in the *next* verse. Take a look with me there, in v. 22:

[22] All this took place to **fulfill** what the Lord had said through the **prophet**: [23] “The **virgin** will conceive and give **birth** to a **son**, and they will **call him Immanuel!**” (which means “**God with us**”).

So ~~some people ask~~, because of this passage: does Jesus have ~~two names? Jesus, and Immanuel?~~ Like was it a first name, middle name type situation? Or like a double first name? That'd be cool. Like his name was ~~Jesus Immanuel Joseph Christ~~ or something. But best we can tell, it wasn't any of that. ~~Jesus was the actual name~~ Joseph was told to give this baby. ~~Immanuel is simply an~~ **editorial note from Matthew**, about something that was ~~true of Jesus~~. In Isaiah,³ there's a story where God's people are especially nervous that God has forgotten and abandoned them. But as a sign that he ~~hasn't~~, he says that a woman in that place will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him 'Immanuel.' In other words, that child would be a way of God ~~guaranteeing~~ that he was still with his people, and hadn't forgotten them.

So Matthew takes ~~that detail from that story~~, and he ~~applies~~ it to the situation with Jesus. He says ~~just like how that child was a sign that God hadn't forgotten his people, so also this child, born to Mary, is a sign that God hasn't forgotten his people~~. Except ~~this~~ time, there's an added layer to it. ~~This time, not only will the child be a sign that God is with Israel; this child will be God, with Israel~~. As in, *God in the flesh*. One more suggestion by Matthew that this child, Jesus, is in fact God himself.

Now, here's what's interesting: we don't even know ~~if Mary and Joseph understood all those layers of meaning behind Jesus' names~~. In fact, there's a fairly good chance they ~~didn't~~. But **what they did know is that there was something unique and different about this child. They knew that God himself was somehow involved in this process. And that this child would, on some level, be a significant part of God's plan to save his people. And that because of all that, they shouldn't be afraid to move forward with their plans to be married, and have this child.** *That* much, at least, they could piece together.

So ~~look at how they respond~~ to all of it. Continuing in v. 24-25:

³ Specifically, Isaiah 7:1-14.

[24] When Joseph woke up, he **did** what the angel of the Lord had **commanded** him and took Mary home as his wife. [25] But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the **name Jesus**.

Joseph wakes up from his dream, and he does exactly what the angel told him to do. He goes forward with their plans to get married. And just as instructed, he gives the child the name *Jesus*. Joseph took on the shame, and the ridicule that came with marrying a woman carrying a child that wasn't his. He took on the disgrace that came with it, that he didn't have to take on. *Mary* took on the judgment and the glares and the accusations that would inevitably come as a result of it all, that *she* didn't deserve. And **they did it all because this child born to them was a part of God's plan to set things right in the world, to save God's people from their sins.**

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So let's take a step back for a bit and ask the question: ***what does this story mean for you and me?*** All of this happened a long time ago, in a different time and place than the one we currently live in. And to my knowledge, none of us are currently pregnant with a miracle baby by the Holy Spirit, or being asked to marry someone who *is*. So that said, *what could a story like this possibly have to teach us today?* I think that's a question worth asking.

Here's at least *part* of how I'd answer it. There is a *myth* floating around out there that if you listen to God, obey God, trust God—he will see to it that your life goes *swimmingly* as a result of that decision. He'll make all your wildest dreams come true. He'll give you the house and the car and the job, and the spouse. 'Do things God's way,' some people tell you, 'and you'll get everything you've ever wanted and more.' 'Follow Jesus, and he'll see to it that you never, ever, ever regret it. He'll take care of you in all the ways you *want and expect to be taken care of.*'

That's a *wildly popular message*. And why *wouldn't* it be? It sounds *fantastic*. Who wouldn't want to tap into the idea of God as some sort of cosmic vending machine, where you put in the money, and out comes whatever it is you wanted? That sounds incredible, to be honest with you. **But here's the *problem* with that understanding of God: it's not accurate.** And I could give you plenty of examples *proving* it's not accurate, but I'll just give you one from what we just read. **Here in Matthew chapter 1, we have an unwed husband and wife who, by all appearances, are God-fearing, God-trusting kinds of people. And yet God is in the process of *blowing up their entire life*, as they saw it going.**

And **not only** is their life *not* gonna go the way they *thought* it would, it's going to go exactly the *opposite* of how they thought it would. Not *only* is their life *not* going to go *swimmingly*. For at least the next couple of years, it's going to go quite *horribly*. We're going to cover the rest of the story in the next three weeks, but I'll go ahead and *warn* you: scorn and shame from their friends and neighbors is just the *beginning* of their troubles. By the end of the story, they're fleeing into the night desert with their two year old because an evil king wants to kill him, and is willing to kill a whole *village* of kids under two just to make sure that it happens.

This is not Mary and Joseph's best life now. Far from it, in fact. Their **lives are being completely upended**. From a quiet, run-of-the-mill existence to becoming the talk of the town in all the worst ways. From establishing a life on their own to living life on the run from an evil dictator. From upstanding members of society to having their reputations permanently marred. Life as *they* planned it is in shambles. And **none of this stuff** happening to them **is incidental** to the story—not at all. *Most* of it is a *direct result* of them doing what God is telling them to do. **Their difficulty doesn't happen despite their obedience to God; most of it happens because of their obedience to God.** They are taking on hardship that would not *exist* if it weren't for them saying *yes* to what *God* asked them to do.

And the **Scriptures make it fairly clear** that if we decide to follow Jesus, we likely will experience *some* of the very same things they did. Your life could be *upended too*. My life could be upended too. Our *reputations* could suffer too. In fact, look with me at **2 Timothy 3:12**, up on the screen. It says this:

*Indeed, **all** (how many people? **All**) who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted.***

On a number of occasions, the bible actually tells us “if you want to follow Jesus, *your* reputation *will* suffer because of it. Guaranteed.” Some people will choose to *dislike* you and even *malign* you. Not just in general—but *directly as a result* of your decision to follow Jesus. // *Now, as we've mentioned before, that doesn't mean that followers of Jesus should have a **persecution complex**. It doesn't mean we should cry “persecution” everytime the world doesn't *cater* to us, like the boy crying wolf. And it doesn't mean we should go out and *seek* persecution, being jerks to people and then justifying it by saying “well, God did say people would hate me, so I guess I'm doing it right.” Leave God out of *that* mess. If you want to go and be a jerk to people, do it under your own name—not his. // *But* all of this *does mean* that **we shouldn't be surprised when we encounter a loss***

of reputation, people thinking a little less of us, or even opposing us, as a result of following Jesus. That is to be expected. It *will happen* to us, just like it happened to Mary and Joseph in the story.

So **here's my point**: *sometimes, certain aspects of your life may indeed go better because of obedience and trust in Jesus. Sometimes, it plays out that way. But if you're following Jesus because you think that sort of experience is guaranteed, you might want to reconsider.* Because there's a story of a faithful man named Joseph, and a pregnant woman named Mary who would be glad to tell you that's not always how it goes. **Don't decide to follow Jesus because it will go well for you if you do. Follow Jesus because it's worth it, no matter how well or poorly it goes.**

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So **knowing all that**, here's my **other question**: **what makes that worth it?** What on earth would motivate a young Jewish man and woman to endure their lives being upended like this? What in the world would motivate *millions of followers of Jesus* down throughout *history* to endure things like that? And why in the world should *you and I* as followers of Jesus endure things like that? What could possibly make *that experience, worth it?* Here's what I'd tell you...

It's in the names.

It's in the *names*. **The answer** for what could possibly make all that suffering *worth it*—for Mary and Joseph, and for you and I—can be found in the *names* the angel gives for this child who is going to be born to them. Let me explain. Remember, there were two names: *Jesus*, and *Immanuel*. Let's take them each in turn.

Jesus

“Jesus” meant **God saves**. As in, this child, who was in Mary's womb would be the means by which God would save his people from their sins. Now, that was *significant* to Mary and Joseph in its own way. But think about the *added* significance to *us* today. **You and I know the rest of the story.** We know that the *way* this child will “save his people from their sins” is that he will go to the cross, where he will take the sins of the world on his *shoulders*. As the apostle Paul would put it, “God made him who *knew no sin*, to *become sin* for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.”⁴

You see, **Jesus himself would be “despised”** and “rejected.” He too would be “held in low esteem” by those around him. Mary and Joseph wouldn't be the last ones to endure

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

scorn and shame and glances from people around them. Their *son* would experience the same thing, only in far greater measure. And Isaiah 53 tells us that Jesus would do that because it was *our* shame that he carried. It was *our* disgrace that he bore. It was *our* punishment that crushed him. It was *our* transgressions that pierced him. The way Jesus would “save his people from their sins” is that he would allow himself to be swallowed up by it all on our *behalf*. And then he would swallow *it* up in victory.⁵

So listen: **if you’ve ever endured** disgrace that you didn’t deserve, Jesus has been there too. If you’ve ever had your reputation marred unfairly, Jesus has too. The book of Hebrews actually tells us that it’s *fitting* that Jesus would *suffer* in order to save us, because then he could identify with *us* in our suffering, and we could identify with *him* in his.⁶ He suffered on our behalf, which means he can grant *us* the ability to suffer well. And so that we could know we’re not alone *in* our suffering. Which leads us to the second name of Jesus...

Immanuel

Immanuel means “**God with us.**” Specifically, it was the name given to a child to assure God’s people that he had not forgotten them, that he was *with* them, and that he would not *abandon* them. // **As a follower of Jesus, I think one of the most difficult parts about suffering is that fear in the back of our mind that we’ve been forgotten. That God doesn’t care what is happening to us. That he’s indifferent to our pain and our struggle. That he’s left us out there to fend for ourselves. That fear in us that nobody’s coming to save us or help us.**

But the name *Immanuel* in the bible tells us a completely different story. The name *Immanuel* tells us that whatever else is true of us, one thing that *can’t* be true is that we’ve been forgotten. One thing that *isn’t* true is that God has abandoned us. The name *Immanuel* tells us that God of the universe, crowned in glory and splendor from eternity past—*that God*—was not too good to suffer. He was not too good to put on flesh and blood. Was not too good to come and live *with* his people, and to suffer *alongside* them. And then to demonstrate *to* those people, once and for all, that they were not alone. That they *had not* been forgotten, and that they never *would* be.

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 15.

⁶ See most of Hebrews 2, specifically v. 10.

So that God sent his son, born of a virgin, to a man and a woman who, no doubt, *would* suffer. But they would *suffer* because *this* child—his life, death, and resurrection—would one day make it all *worth* it.

So listen: I **don't know what you walked in here** dealing with this morning. Your life *might* feel like it's going pretty great. Things might in fact *be* going "swimmingly" for you right now. And if so, great. But I will tell you that things won't *always* be that way. And I want you to know that when the worst happens—when the bottom drops out in your life—you will have a savior who is *with* you, even then.

Or **maybe** you're here this morning and the **bottom has dropped out**. Maybe you're in that place right now where it just feels like your life is blowing up, or already *has* blown up completely, and it's in shambles. And if *that's* you, I want *you* to know that you have a savior, right now, who is *Immanuel*: God, *with*, you—even now.

And **if you're here** this morning and life is **somewhere in between**: not awful, but not great either. I want *all* of us to know that this Christmas, we have a God who is *Jesus*, *Immanuel*. God *with* us, to *save* us. And I'm telling you that *if you know that* about God, it may not *fix* everything in the way you want it fixed. But it does make a *world* of difference.

So we're going to **head to the tables** together in just a few moments to take communion. And if you're a follower of Jesus, I can't think of a more fitting way to remember these two realities about him. When we take of the bread and the cup, we remember that Jesus *is* "God saves." That he gave up his very body and blood so that we could be rescued from our sin. *And* when we take of the bread and the cup, we remember that Jesus is *Immanuel*. That he did all that so you and I could know that we will never be forgotten. So we invite anyone who is a follower of Jesus in the room to respond by remembering those realities through communion.

Let me pray for us and we'll do just that.