

An Unplanned Pregnancy

Matthew 1:18-25

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[Note: Give everyone a nail/spike when they come in]

It's a bit awkward for me to be speaking to you today because I'm known as a man of very few words. I may look like one of your long-winded pastors but my name is actually Joseph. I'm the only character in the Christmas account that doesn't say a word. BTW, the innkeeper doesn't speak either but it might surprise you to know that he's not even mentioned in the Bible.

A long time ago in a *Galilee* far, far away [see what I did there?], a lot of things took place that turned my life upside down. Most of my relatives lived in Bethlehem but my home was in Nazareth, a small farming village in Galilee that at one time was beautifully secluded. When I was a young boy the pagans started putting up altars to their gods and it became a pretty dark place to live. Then, when the Romans started pushing their weight around, my little town was turned upside down and became known as a place of bad morals.

People even made fun of how we talked, like how some of you tease people from Wisconsin for their accent! A disciple named Nathanael made this remark in John 1:46: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

I'm known as a carpenter but I was more like a general contractor. I was good with hammers and nails [hold up hammer and spike] and I also worked with stone. I actually made a lot of wood handles for the various tools that people used. I especially liked making yokes. My father's name was Jacob and he was a carpenter as well. I dreamt of the day I could pass along my trade to my son. My parents always teased me about being a dreamer, pointing out that the Joseph of the Old Testament was also known for his dreams.

One of my dreams was to be as righteous as I could be. I loved God so much that I wanted to live out my faith every day in every way. I'm a bit embarrassed that Matthew referred to me as a "*just*" or "*righteous man*" in 1:19 because I had become known as a *tsaddiyq* (sawd-deek). That's a Hebrew word that was reserved for someone known for uncompromising commitment to the Law of Moses.

I was careful about what I ate, whom I hung out with, and didn't open my shop on the Sabbath. Incidentally, I admire Chick-fil-A in your culture for their commitment to not open on Sundays. But I do love that that they did open last Sunday to prepare thousands of free meals for those trapped in the Atlanta airport after a massive power failure. They put compassion over their convictions, something I was going to be faced with as well.

I didn't just *do* spiritual things; my very identity was a *tsaddiyq*. People admired me and little boys wanted to be like me. I understand in your culture people look up to athletes, actors and actresses; from what I've been reading I think you're aiming way too low.

I should tell you that while I was a *tsaddiyq* and therefore kept my distance from anything out there that would derail me spiritually; I was also unsettled by what kind of blood flowed within me. Let me explain. I had the wonderful benefit of being a descendant of King David. That meant that I had some royalty in my veins and I knew that the Messiah would eventually rule on David's throne.

However, just as some of you have some failures hanging off the branches in your family tree, one of my relatives really messed things up for me. Let me take you back to an incident that happened in Jeremiah 36. In David's line there was a wicked king named Jehoiakim who when confronted with Scripture, decided to burn the Bible. As a result, verse 30 states: ***"...He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night."*** I'll come back to this curse later.

So I had some fame but my family name was also filled with shame because of what Jehoiakim had done. As a *tsaddiyq* I determined to delight in Scripture and not disparage it like he did. I had it all – a strong faith, a good family and a lot of friends. My business was going well and my dreams for the future were filled with images of a beautiful maiden named Mary.

Our families had known each other for years and our parents had actually arranged for us to get married. I was OK with that because she was beautiful on the outside and on the inside. I was really attracted to her faith because she was a woman who feared the Lord. There was no way I wanted to marry someone who was lukewarm toward the Lord. I hear that believers in your culture often settle for a spiritual mismatch in matrimony. I don't understand that.

Our engagement period, or betrothal, was very serious. We had a ceremony with two witnesses and we signed an official marriage contract. I gave Mary a present and her father made a down payment on her dowry. This betrothal period often lasted a year and people referred to us as husband and wife.

However, we were never intimate and wouldn't think of living together. Mary lived with her parents and I lived with mine. It was a period in which we were to test our commitment and faithfulness. Any sexual immorality during this time would be severely punished and would be immediate grounds for divorce. This was a happy time, filled with dreaming and planning and building. I fashioned a number of pieces of furniture and works of art for Mary with my tools [hold up planer] and Mary stored them at her place in anticipation of our big day.

I was busy building a house for us to move into after the wedding. [Hold up spike and saw] Actually, it was an addition to my father's home (that's how we did it back then). I drew up the design and labored in love for the love of my life.

Shortly after we got engaged, Mary traveled to her cousin Elizabeth's house to help her out because amazingly, she was pregnant in her old age, after having been barren her whole life. Mary mentioned something about an angel appearing to Zechariah in order to announce the news but I was skeptical.

After Mary returned she sat me down and said we needed to talk. She looked a bit different and I sensed that this was going to be a life-changing conversation. She got right to the point and it was pointed, let me tell you! She told me that she was pregnant! The only thing I knew was that I wasn't the father. How could she do this to me? I thought I knew her. My dreams were dashed like a hammer hitting some fragile pottery [Demonstrate by smashing pottery].

I cried more that day than I had my entire life. Tell me, guys, would you have believed her? How could she cheat on me and then lie about it? You know how the story turns out but put yourself in my sandals. Imagine your fiancée comes and says, "*I'm pregnant but I haven't been with anyone else. God did a miracle and all generations are going to call me blessed.*" This didn't seem like a blessing to me! One of your Country and Western songs summarizes how I felt: "*My pain comes and goes. It comes in the morning and goes all night long.*"

I was turned upside down! I felt like a spike had been driven through my soul [Hold spike up to heart]. My idyllic expectation of getting married and having a son had turned into a nightmare. My dreams were destroyed and I didn't know

what to do because I still loved Mary. I was torn between my legal rights and love; between conviction and compassion; between doing what would be right for her and still being thought of as righteous myself.

I'm now a stressed-out *tsaddiyq*. My fiancée is pregnant and I'm not the father! This is a big problem because as a *tsaddiyq* my reputation was on the line. In my small town filled with gossipers (some of you are from small towns so you understand), people were saying all sorts of bad things about me. My fellow *tsaddiyqim* quoted the Scriptures, urging me to expose her publicly and then have her punished.

I didn't want to be like Jehoiakim and just disregard the Scriptures and yet I was in a huge dilemma because as a *tsaddiyq* I was committed to obey the Word of God. I was thankful that I had some other options. Stoning was not done very often in my day because the Romans wouldn't permit it, but Deuteronomy 24:1 allowed me to take her to court, to collect more money from her family and to publicly humiliate her. I had every legal right to do so but because I loved her, I didn't want to do that.

Instead, my plan was to just find two witnesses and privately break off our relationship without giving a reason for it. This would lessen Mary's shame and it would restore my name as a *tsaddiyq*. If I didn't divorce her people would assume that I was the daddy. I guess I was trying to do the loving thing and still fulfill the law at the same time. But most of all I wanted to do what God wanted. My plan was to do everything quickly and quietly...but I was a sad *tsaddiyq*.

I couldn't stop thinking about this. Mary told me that she had not been with another man and that somehow the Holy Spirit was the cause of conception. Who had ever heard of a virgin getting pregnant? And then the Scripture found in Isaiah 7:14 shouted in my mind: ***“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”***

I quickly brushed this aside. Mary was too young. Nazareth was too small. We were supposed to get married! And so I determined to divorce her and just get on with my life without a wife. By the way, I didn't rush into the situation and I didn't allow my emotions to control my response. Sure I was hurt but I wanted to take the time I needed to allow God to speak. I'm glad I did.

After I thought I had settled everything (though I admit that I was still very unsettled), I had a dream in which an angel of the Lord showed up and said:

“Joseph, son of David, [he reminded me that I was related to royalty as a descendant of David – it’s cool that he never brought up the junk that Jehoiakim did] **do not fear to take Mary as your wife,** [I was afraid to do that because I didn’t want to offend God but was also afraid to lose my reputation in my community] **for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit** [Mary was telling the truth!].

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, [in our culture for me to name the baby meant that I would become the legal father and he would be my adopted son] **for He will save His people from their sins.”** [The name “Jesus” was common and was a form of Joshua, which means, “*the Lord saves.*”] It was true! The baby inside Mary’s belly would be called **“Immanuel!”** God *was* really with us.

What a relief...I *was* able to obey the Word of God because God’s Word came to me through an angel! And, like you learned last week, God’s timing is always impeccable! I needed that dream at that exact time.

As soon as I woke up I immediately did what the Angel had commanded me. I ran to find Mary and told her we were getting married. She wanted to know when and I said, “*right now!*” I then legally sealed our marriage by taking her to my half-finished home as my wife, deliberately tying my destiny to Mary and her child, no matter what. Out of respect and reverence for the baby she was carrying I was not intimate with Mary until after she gave birth to Jesus.

Many wondered why I did what I did because they said by marrying Mary people would think that I was the father. I didn’t care but I did tire of how mean people were to us. We were never invited to their homes, no one would hire me as a carpenter and the things they said about Mary were really hard to hear.

Whenever we would try to explain the facts people would just shake their heads and say, “*Yeah, right!*” We lived under a cloud of humiliation, knowing that almost everyone believed that we had been immoral. Because of my tenacious love for Mary and my devotion to the Lord I gladly took her shame and made it my own.

I was frankly glad when I heard that everyone had to register for the census in their hometowns because that would get us away from the nosy Nazarenes for a while. That meant that we had to travel about 90 miles south to Bethlehem, the city of David, because that’s where my family records were kept. That’s about the

distance between Cedar Rapids and the Quad Cities. It was no easy task traveling this far with a pregnant wife. It took us over a week to get there, stopping only on the Sabbath to rest.

I wept and worshipped as God brought Micah 5:2 to mind which says that the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem. Incidentally, we were too poor to use a donkey. We walked the whole way there. I know that messes up your Christmas cards but you're going to just have to deal with it.

When we arrived in Bethlehem I thought one of my relatives would help us out with a room but we were shunned by all of them. It's amazing how quickly gossip spreads, even before Facebook and Twitter!

I kept watching Mary and knew that we didn't have much time. I started running from place to place, finally finding an inn but was told that it was full. The manager motioned to a manger out back so I gladly accepted. When we got there, I was overcome with sadness. My dream had been to build a house for us [**hold up nail**] and now we were in a cave-like area that was dirty and smelled of manure.

All of a sudden Mary's water broke! I became frantic and Mary told me to sit down and that everything would be OK. I think she knew that if I hadn't sat down I would have fainted and fallen down.

It all happened pretty quickly. Mary gave birth to a baby boy and I wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a feeding trough for animals. When Mary put Him in my arms I felt like I was holding heaven.

Just as we were enjoying the miracle of this moment, I heard some loud noise outside. I grabbed my hammer [**pick up hammer**] and ran to the door. I would do anything to protect my wife and the baby boy.

I was met by a group of gruff shepherds who looked like they had seen something supernatural. They were filled with joy and couldn't stop talking, saying something about glory to God in the highest. I moved to the side and they crowded around the makeshift cradle. These shepherds dropped to their knees in worship, giving thanks for Mary's little lamb. They didn't stay long and they almost didn't seem to notice Mary and me. They started running to all the houses spreading the news that Immanuel had arrived!

Some time later when we were staying in a house, some wise guys from the other side of the desert came to worship Jesus and gave gifts to Him. All of this was beyond my wildest dreams. I should let you know that contrary to your nativity scenes, these guys showed up many months after Jesus was born. And there were way more than three...I see why you think there were three because there were three gifts given but there was actually an entire caravan (no, not the minivan), that traveled hundreds of miles across the desert.

Oh, and while I'm turning things upside down for you, the star wasn't over the manger either. It actually led the group of astrologers to the house we were staying in when Jesus was a toddler. But, I digress.

I was looking forward to finally going back to Nazareth with my new family and couldn't wait to teach Jesus how to use my tools. [Pick up tools] As I was drifting off to sleep one night, I had another dream. If you want to hear what happened next you'll need to come back next weekend for a message called, "The Post-Christmas Blahs."

When we eventually arrived back in Nazareth, no one threw us a baby shower. People were still talking and wagging both their tongues and their heads at us. I tried to get some work and Mary and I did our best to raise Jesus. He seemed to enjoy carpentry and was fascinated by wood and nails. He spent hours as a toddler using my hammer to pound nails into rough timber [pound spike with hammer].

I kept something that He made...[Hold up cross].

As a carpenter's son He was used to the feel of wood and nails. [Please look at the nail you were given when you came in.]

One day a soldier took a nail much bigger than this and hammered it through His hands and His feet and nailed Him to a rough piece of timber [hold up spike and then pound into wood].

The cradle in Bethlehem leads to the cross at Calvary.

Lessons from a Carpenter

Before leaving I'd like to pass along some life lessons.

1. Jesus was fully human and fully God. He is both Son of David *and* Son of Deity. Because I was not his biological father, the curse of Jehoiakim was not passed along to Jesus! And since I adopted Him, He was the legal heir to the throne of David. BTW, I want to give a shout-out to step parents, foster parents and to blended families as you work at turning your house into a home.

2. God often calls us to do more than we think we can do but He never calls us to do more than He can do. At Christmas we're reminded that the Deity did not stay distant but came close to us. We couldn't get to where He is so He came to us. I read one of your Gallup polls this week that reported 8 out of 10 Americans are afflicted by stress. Listen, Jesus came down into the stress of your marriages, or into your singleness. He came to help you with the junk in your job or the fear of not finding work. He came to help you with your health concerns, into the friction in your families, into the stress of your schooling and into the anxiety about your finances.

I like to pronounce Christmas this way: "*Christ-mess*," because Christ came into our mess. It's upside down for God to become a man but He did it in order to turn us right side up. If you're faced with something that seems too hard for you, remember what the angel said to Mary in Luke 1:37: "***For nothing is impossible with God.***"

3. God often shatters our dreams so He can give us new ones. Are you still holding on to a dream that God wants you to let go of? Sometimes the future you think you are preparing for is not what the Lord has in mind for you. One of the hardest things for me to do was to give up control. I had to die to reputation, comfort and status. Jesus is not just someone you simply add to your life like downloading an app to your phone. Give him complete control and He will turn your life upside down, which will actually be right side up!

4. Always do what God tells you to do even if it doesn't make sense. Perhaps you want detailed explanations before you'll obey. God wants us to obey no matter what. Are you in a dilemma right now? You will never go wrong when you do what is right. Like me, you may be faced with the choice between doing what you want and what God wants. Always do what He wants even if it seems unbelievable and impossible. Here's a message that's not very popular in your "*easy believism*" evangelical culture – the reality is that following Jesus may make your life harder, not easier. You may lose your reputation when you receive Him into your life.

5. Our righteousness is never enough to satisfy a righteous God. My good works were never good enough – and neither are yours. I thought my time as a *tsaddiyq* was over forever. I feared that I would never be known as a righteous man again and then I realized that my own righteousness was never enough in the first place. I needed the Savior's *tsaddiyq* applied to my account and that happened when I placed my faith and trust in Him. With Jesus a new righteousness was brought into the world and those who receive salvation have this righteousness applied to their account. When you are saved, the Savior will take all your shame. Here's a question for you. If I was "righteous" and needed a Redeemer, don't you think you do too?

Here's an upside down thought. Those who are decidedly unrighteous can immediately receive the righteousness of Christ. Only those who are humble will receive His holiness. Only those who admit they are sinners can be saved.

6. You need to be saved by the Savior. Jesus means Savior and Immanuel means "God with us." You and I need both. We need to be saved from our sins and the only way that could happen was for the Savior to leave heaven and live among us. That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown! The Savior is now among us.

You too can be adopted into God's family by receiving the gift of His Son right now. John 1:12-13: ***"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."***

If you're ready to accept Immanuel, you could express that by praying this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I know I'm not righteous. I confess that I am a sinner and I want to turn from the way I've been living. Thank you that you are Immanuel and I now ask you to be my Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your lordship for the rest of my life. Take my dreams and help me to live out your desires for I want your purpose for my life, not my own. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking you to come into my life. I want to be adopted into your family. Make me into the person you want me to be. In the name of Immanuel, I ask this. Amen."

This closing song summarizes some of the things I felt as I tried be the best stepfather I could be to the Savior.

Joseph's Lullaby

As you leave today, take this **nail** and put it somewhere prominent as a reminder that while Christ was born in a cradle, He came to be crucified on the cross...for unrighteous sinners like you and like me.

Merry Christ-*mess*!