

**“When the Time is Wrong Part II”**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**12.19.21**

**Introduction**

Last week we heard the story about the angel appearing to Mary to tell her that she would give birth to the Messiah. Although it is not explicitly stated, we can imagine how much Jesus’ birth turned Mary’s life upside down. Not expecting to become a parent at that particular juncture in her life, Mary still chose to embrace God’s calling to be an agent of change. This week, we turn to Matthew’s Gospel, to reflect on how Joseph responds to the news.

**Digging Deeper**

Unlike Luke’s Gospel, Matthew cuts to the chase when it comes to the birth of Christ. He tells us that Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph. At the time of Jesus’ birth, engagement was a legally binding contract made between a young man, his fiancé, and both sets of parents. The groom was required to pay a bride-price to the bride’s father (AKA a dowry), and the couple was required to take vows before witnesses. Then, after about a year of engagement, the groom would come take his bride back to his home.

In order to understand the process in our modern times, we might think of there first being an engagement ceremony, and then a year later, a wedding ceremony. However, the term “marriage” probably applied to the engagement ceremony as much or more as the wedding ceremony, since that is when rights over the girl were transferred from the father to the husband.

The biggest distinction between the two phases was that during their engagement they were not permitted to have sexual relations. It was necessary for the groom to bring his bride back to his home as a virgin. In almost every other way, engagement was the same as marriage.

So, to put things into perspective, if an engaged couple decided to separate prior to the wedding, it was considered divorce. If one of them died prior to the fulfillment of the marriage contract, the other was left a widow or widower. If either the man or woman developed a physical relationship with another person during their engagement, it was not merely considered unfaithfulness in a committed relationship, but adultery.

Matthew tells us that sometime between their engagement and wedding celebration, Mary was “found” to be with child. The grammar suggests that Mary already knew about her pregnancy, and someone else, presumably Joseph, was finding out about it for the first time. If Mary had gone into hiding and returned after three months as suggested in the Gospel of Luke, she would have already completed her first trimester and would have been showing when she returned.

Undoubtedly, Joseph suspected infidelity, but Matthew doesn't record the conversation between the young couple. He only reports Joseph's response. Matthew says that because Joseph was "righteous," he had already made up his mind to divorce Mary quietly.

Sometimes it is assumed that Joseph was "righteous" because he planned to divorce Mary quietly rather than demand for her to be executed as prescribed in the Law of Moses. However, at the time that Jesus was born, the Israelites were living under Roman occupation, which meant that they no longer had the authority to carry out capital punishment. Like we see in the case of Jesus, the Israelites were expected to turn a criminal over to the Roman authorities if it was serious enough to result in execution.

But of course, the Romans weren't going to execute a Jewish person for being unfaithful, and so the new protocol under such circumstances was to terminate the marriage. Nearly all biblical scholars agree that Matthew is calling Joseph "righteous" because he is willing to follow the Law of Moses to the fullest extent.

Since Mary and Joseph's marriage was pre-arranged and there would have been little emotional investment in their relationship up to this point, Joseph probably would have exercised little reluctance in following the prescribed steps in nullifying their contract; but even if he wanted to offer forgiveness and proceed with the marriage, it would have been forbidden by law. Therefore, Joseph's choices were to divorce Mary quietly, or humiliate her by demanding a public trial.

"Quietly" divorcing Mary would mean ending the marriage contract in the presence of two or more witnesses; but there would have been cultural expectations to expose her transgressions publicly. In addition to clearing his name and restoring his family honor, it would have been financially advantageous for Joseph to take Mary to a public trial. Therefore, keeping the matter private would have made it difficult for Joseph to recover the dowry he paid to Mary's father.

But before Joseph had an opportunity to put his plan into action, he was visited by a divine messenger in a dream. The messenger explained to Joseph how Mary had become pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. God wanted Joseph to do the unthinkable—God wanted Joseph to marry his fiancé and raise her child as his own. Matthew tells us that when Joseph awoke from his dream, he did as the angel instructed him, and he did not have marital relations with Mary until after Jesus was born.

## **Reflection**

Over the years I've come up with an expression that goes something like this: "There's rarely ever a good time to do the right thing." To be clear, I believe that we should always do the right thing. Perhaps my "saying" is a bit of an exaggeration, but what I mean is that doing the right thing often has undesirable consequences. In the case of

Joseph, there is what appears to be the right thing to everyone else (i.e., divorcing Mary), and then there is doing what God is calling him to do.

It makes me wonder how Joseph was perceived in his community. Did people think that he was gullible for believing Mary's story, or did they think that he was a rebel for ignoring the law and marrying her? Either way, I'm sure it wasn't a good look for him socially.

One biblical scholar suggests that Jesus would have been labeled a *mamzer*, which is a Hebrew word for "estranged one." This label was for anyone whose paternity was uncertain, and there would have been major social repercussions for Jesus throughout his life. If this was true for Jesus, it would have undoubtedly been true for Mary and Joseph as well.

Instead of taking the path of least resistance, Joseph took the road less traveled, and even though Matthew does not spell it out in detail, there was certainly a price for Joseph to pay. To capture it in one sentence, *Joseph was a man of the deepest integrity*. He was willing to do what God was calling him to do regardless of the cost.

## **Invitation**

We can all rest assured that God is not going to call us to do the same thing that God called Joseph to do. It only happened once, and it will never happen again! But don't think for a moment that God isn't going to call you to do things that are difficult. In fact, if you don't occasionally feel the nudge to do something that is going to be unpopular, you're probably not listening very closely to the still small voice in your life.

Matthew's purpose in including this story in his Gospel is not so that we will simply admire Joseph from a distance, but so that Joseph will function as an example to follow in our lives. Matthew's story teaches us that following Jesus, even before he is born, is going to require embracing sacrificial love rather than comfort.

Have you ever had a recurring thought that seemed a bit out of the blue? Like it just keeps coming back and you know it is not your own original thought? And to beat it all, whatever the thought is, it sounds a little...absurd?

As a disclaimer, I'm not suggesting you jump headfirst into every absurd thought that crosses your mind...but pay attention to it. Give it space in your life. Pray about it. Talk to your spiritual confidant and invite their prayers and counsel. If you're still uncertain about what God is calling you to do, you could always reach out to your pastor, and I would love to help you discern God's will. *There's rarely ever a good time to do the right thing*, but maybe the time is now. What is God calling you to do?

## **Reference Tools**

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### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Do you have a favorite Christmas tree ornament? If so, what is it?
2. What are your general impressions of Joseph? If you could have a conversation with him, what questions would you ask?
3. How do you feel about the statement, "There's rarely ever a good time to do the right thing" in the context of this week's message?
4. Do you ever sense that God is nudging you with thoughts that are not your own? If so, how do you respond to God's prompting in your life?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?