

Sermon Draft for December 21, 2025

Text: Matthew 1:18–25

Sermon: “From Unbelief to Faith”

Our text begins with Joseph’s refusal to believe Mary, his legal wife, had conceived, by the Holy Spirit, the Immanuel Child, God himself, prophesied by Isaiah. His divorcing her without making an example of her is exemplary of Christian behavior, which does not revel in the sins of others. But better yet, Joseph’s unbelief is overcome by a dream, and he takes Mary as wife and assumes the paternity of Jesus. A upsetting account of what to do with an allegedly unfaithful wife concludes with the birth of the Immanuel Child, God himself; Joseph’s claiming the child as his own by naming him Jesus; and the consummation of a marriage. Ultimately, this is a story of how God saved us. *Jesus* means “God saves” or “God is salvation.” Mary’s Child turns out to be God appearing in human form. This is what we confess every Sunday: He “**was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary**” (Apostles’ Creed).

Last Sunday's Gospel had to do with John the Baptist's impending execution, which caused him to doubt whether Jesus was really the Messiah about whom he himself had preached. Instead of being released from prison, John is asked to compare the things Jesus has been doing with what Isaiah said about the Messiah: the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.

Today's Gospel takes us a little closer to Christmas, but, like John, Joseph is unbelieving. It was not that Joseph didn't believe Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin bearing a child, but he did not believe that the prophecy was coming true in Mary. Preposterous claims deserve skeptical responses, and no man in Joseph's shoes would have reacted any differently.

Christmas is a Mary-Jesus thing, not a Joseph-Jesus thing. Our carols are more about Mary and Jesus. Few speak of Joseph. Joseph's role is secondary, somewhere back among the figures of angels, the shepherds, and the Wise Men.

Writing through Matthew, the Holy Spirit puts Joseph in the center of the stage. For Matthew, Christmas begins with Joseph's dilemma about what to do with a wife whom he thinks is carrying another man's child.

Culture affects what we think is right and wrong. Joseph's situation of what to do with a woman to whom he was legally but still not physically joined would not be a major problem today. Today some couples live together without being married, and they even have children. The scenario of a man marrying a woman who is carrying another man's child is not uncommon. Joseph's world was much different. Israelite men were obliged to have a son to secure the inheritance God had given the sons of Israel. Since Joseph was David's descendant, he knew he could be the progenitor of the Messiah. Someone else's child would not do. One way to discredit a person is reminding others that he is illegitimate. Jesus had to face this accusation.

From the very beginning, the enemies of the Church have attempted to discredit Christianity by claiming that Jesus may have been illegitimate. If this were really true, then Jesus would not be the Son of God and the Christian religion would be a fraud.

Joseph believed Mary's word that she was pregnant, but not that she was pregnant with the Immanuel Child, the one promised by the prophet Isaiah. Legal separation and divorce are bitter experiences, but in Joseph's mind, he had no other choice.

Through repetition, what the Creed says about Jesus being "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary" may have become so ordinary that we are unaware of the tension this caused between Mary and Joseph. If Mary had been unfaithful, Joseph would lose a wife and Mary would lose not only a husband but also support for her child and herself.

John the Baptist began to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, but for Joseph there were no doubts. He simply rejected Mary's claim that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Things like this simply do not happen—and that's right, things like this simply don't happen—or don't happen simply—but it happened once and God became a human being just like us.

Old Testament law required divorce in cases of adultery and also allowed it without cause. Joseph chose the latter option. He would not tell anyone what he thought Mary had done. Joseph had chosen the kinder path. It's one thing to be morally right and another and harder thing to forgive. Indignation about the infractions of others comes easier to us than overlooking their faults.

Joseph did not want to make a bad situation worse for her. Joseph is introduced in the Gospel account as not believing the word of salvation that Mary preached to him about her Child being the Son of God, but, on the other hand, Joseph is what every Christian should be in not exposing the sins of others. In his explanation of the commandment against bearing false witness, Luther says that not only should we avoid lying, but we should also put the best construction on even the bad things others do.

In broadcasting the misdeeds of others, we bring condemnation upon ourselves.

Now Joseph had to get down to the brass tacks of how he was going to prevent Mary's pregnancy from coming to light in a village of less than a hundred people. Today a woman can travel out of town to give birth. Not so in the ancient world. Women rarely, if ever, traveled alone. Sooner rather than later her predicament would become fodder for wagging tongues. This is probably the reality with which Joseph struggled as he lay in bed one night.

Rare is the person whose sleep is never disrupted by the troubles of the day. We sleep, but we really don't. Our minds are fully engaged in anxious dreams. When we awake, it's as if we'd never slept at all. Caught in a sleepless sleep, Joseph is told by the Lord's angel to take Mary as his wife. Hers is not an ordinary child, but is the God who redeems his people.

The God who had come in dreams to Abraham, Jacob, and the Old Testament Joseph, the one who was hated by his brothers, was now coming to another Joseph in a dream. Mary's husband would not be the biological father of the Messiah, but he would be his legal father. Joseph would pass his claim as the Son of David to Jesus. As soon as Joseph wakes from his dream—and probably much to Mary's surprise he immediately takes her into his home as his wife.

If, in our Christmas celebrations, Joseph is the minor figure, in the Christmas story the first Christians heard he had the major part. That dream telling him to take Mary as his wife was not his last one. He received another dream to flee from the wrath of Herod to Egypt to save the Child's life. He received still another dream, some years later, instructing him to return from Egypt to their home in Galilee. Then there is still another dream on the way back to Galilee, that they should avoid Judea, where the treacherous son of the murderous Herod reigned.

Matthew's Christmas story begins with Joseph's refusal to believe his wife's report that she is carrying a Child conceived by the Holy Spirit, but it ends with Joseph as the hero of faith and the guardian of the Child born to be the Savior of the world.

We can define life in several ways. One definition to which we can all resonate is that life is a series of dilemmas. When we get through one dilemma, we face another. That also describes the Old Testament. God's people get out of one dilemma, and in a short time they're in another. When God resolved Joseph's dilemma of what to do with an unfaithful wife, he was resolving the predicament of all humankind. Mary's Child would save God's people from their sin by releasing them from death and Satan's power. All this Mary's Child could do because Jesus, "God saves us," is also the Immanuel Child. That name means "God is with us." God could save us because he became one with us in Mary's Child. He became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

For all legal purposes throughout his life, Jesus was known as Joseph's son, and from Joseph Jesus learned the trade of a carpenter. Yet after Matthew's Christmas narrative, Joseph plays no part in the Gospel. If there was any doubt about Jesus being the Son of David by blood and not just in law, Luke tells us that Mary was a descendant of David. So, Jesus is David's Son by law through Joseph and by blood through Mary. On Palm Sunday, this all comes to a pinnacle when the crowds greet Jesus with "***Hosanna to the Son of David!***" (Matthew 21:9).

Joseph's legacy would not only be preserved in the life of Jesus but also in the lives of his own sons. James, the eldest brother of Jesus, became the bishop of Jerusalem and the author of a New Testament book. Jude, another son of Joseph, also wrote a book of the Bible. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, who was related to whom by blood lost its importance. Jesus said that his brothers, sisters, and mothers were those who did the will of his Father in believing that he was the Christ (Matthew 12:50).

Matthew's Christmas story begins with unbelief and ends with faith. Maybe that's the way every Christmas should be. In the precious name of our Emmanuel! Amen