

**DREAMS OF CHRISTMAS:
(1) DREAMS OF A WONDROUS BIRTH**

Matthew 1:20

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SCRIPTURE

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. {19} Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. {20} But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. {21} She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." {22} All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: {23} "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." {24} When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, {25} but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus (Matt 1:18-25 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes, or better, sandals. Your fiancée is pregnant. You're an honorable man; you've not had sexual relations with her. You thought she was an honorable woman. But now she's pregnant, probably several months along and starting to show. How do you feel as this news crashes into your world like a rock through a ceramic vase?

As an engaged man, betrayal may well have been at the top of Joseph's list of suspicions. Certain expectations and promises accompanied engagement in those days, all insured by one's background and social custom. Mary seems to have come from a good family. Her cousin, Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, was married to Zechariah the priest. One would expect Mary to be a woman of purity and devotion.

Joseph was a man of similar quality. He was from the tribe of Judah. His ancestry could be traced back directly to David, Israel's greatest king. To David it was promised, "I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations." (Ps 89:4) You might say Joseph was a prince. But the present political reality was that David's

dynasty was dead. Rome ruled the world and Herod the murderer, Rome's official agent, sat on David's throne. So royal descendants like Joseph lived "under the radar," intentionally avoiding any notice by the authorities. Life was short for royals with aspirations. It was safer just to be a carpenter with a common name.

You could think of Joseph and Mary as two ordinary people whose goals were like anyone else's in their culture. All things being normal, they'd get married, have children, live and work in Nazareth, die, and then be forgotten.

But such was not God's plan. Mary and Joseph were to be parents of a king. Officially the only rightful ruler of Judea was Herod. Rome had said so. Officially, the divine promise that David's throne would be established forever had been suppressed and forgotten. Officially. But God had not forgotten. When God makes a covenant and swears to it, he keeps it.

So it was that from an obscure family, in an obscure town in Galilee, that God chose a young woman, a virgin named Mary, to bear a child. Born into the house of Joseph, he would be the son of David. Conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, he would be the Son of God.

It was all just as planned by God and predicted by the prophets. The necessary events in history had come to pass. All was in readiness for the new king to be born. He only needed a family; a mother to bear him and a man willing to marry the mother of a child not his. That would require a truly exceptional man.

In those days marriage not only provided a safe environment for rearing children, it was also essential to guaranteeing the legal rights of heirs. If you were the son of a nobleman or a landowner or a priest, but your mother was not married to your father, his land, title or office was denied you. But with married parents, what was theirs became yours.

As a royal descendant, Joseph's son could lay claim to the throne of David if the political circumstances ever changed. Taking Mary as his wife meant the child she bore would have the status of Joseph's firstborn son. Would Joseph be willing to pass that claim on to a child that wasn't really his? If Joseph married someone else, he wouldn't have to do that. His own son would be the heir. Though in all likelihood, the only inheritance Joseph's own son might get would be a carpenter shop and maybe a contract to build a throne for someone else.

An engagement was a legal and moral commitment. It wasn't something that was easily broken off. You didn't just take the rings back to the jewelry store and let that be the end of it. Engagements were binding affairs. Families would exchange gifts; a dowry was

provided for the future bride and presents to the parents and relatives. There'd be a feast with many guests. Rings were exchanged signifying absolute fidelity to one's betrothed. Infidelity was considered adultery. Punishment was severe.

Now it appeared that Mary had been unfaithful. What else could it be but unfaithfulness? She was pregnant and Joseph wasn't the father. Perhaps she had told him her story. But would you have believed it if you were Joseph? Joseph had some tough decisions to make.

He could wed the woman he believed adulterous, probably becoming a scorn and laughingstock for the community. He could divorce her; something required if he wanted out of a binding engagement. He could turn her in to the religious authorities and have her punished; they'd probably stone her.

But Joseph was a good and kind man and all three choices were unpleasant. What was he to do? What would he choose? Humiliation? Divorce? Vengeance?

I think we can reasonably imagine that when faced with these choices Joseph went to bed in a tortured state of mind. He didn't sleep well at all, but tossed and turned his way in and out of consciousness, first crying then shouting and perhaps finally praying. I wonder how many nights this went on before the merciful appearance of the angel in a dream.

Mary by now had already been visited by the angel Gabriel, probably the same angel that appeared to Joseph. Gabriel had come to her with startling news. "Do not be afraid, Mary," he'd told her. "You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

But Mary isn't any more gullible than Joseph. So to reinforce the revelation, the angel tells her that Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, is pregnant as well. Mary's reply to all this is, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Just as the angel foretold, Mary becomes pregnant. Knowing she can't keep it a secret, she seeks out Joseph and tells him the news. But to Joseph, this revelation is not good news. To put it bluntly, he doesn't believe it. His manhood, his honor, his future are all threatened. Mary leaves town, partly to avoid prying eyes and gossip, partly to go and help her pregnant cousin.

And Joseph is left behind in torment until one night on his tear-drenched pillow, in a dream, the angel appears to him bringing good news of a great miracle that heals Joseph's troubled heart. "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. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

If there was ever a contrast between Law and Grace, this is it! On the one hand we see Joseph hurting, terrified, angry and suffering because of the Law. The misery of divorce came with the possibility of Mary being stoned to death. It would all be legal, of course, but there'd be no consolation, no comfort, no healing of the mind; just the raw wound of a broken heart.

On the other hand, in the midst of Joseph's midnight agony, comes the refreshing and calming word of the Gospel, the good news spoken by the angel. "Do not be afraid!" he tells Joseph. "None of the terrible things you've contemplated will happen. It's okay to take Mary home as your wife. The news of her pregnancy is not the bad news you suspected but the surprising good news of the Gospel. "What is conceived in (Mary) is from the Holy Spirit!" This isn't the child of an adulterous liaison. This is the Son of God conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Mary tried to tell you. That's why he is not to be given your name, Joseph, as is the custom. Rather, as the Son of God, his name will be Jesus, *The Lord Saves*, because he will save his people from their sins.

When the angel came to Mary with a similar announcement, she was skeptical too. It was news that her cousin would bear a child in her old age that convinced Mary. Though elderly and beyond childbearing years, the great honor of being a mother would belong to Elizabeth. Mary hears this news and believes.

But for Joseph, a different kind of evidence is needed. The word of an angel in a dream is good. But dreams can be misleading. Perhaps Joseph in his desperation has created the vision himself. Maybe he wants to believe Mary so badly he concocts his own dream. So another witness is needed. It's found in Scripture. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Isaiah had said, "The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel - which means 'God with us.'"

Joseph hears the angel. He compares the angel's word with Scripture. And Joseph is convinced. In faith, he acts. As soon as Joseph gets off his bed we're told that "...he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Matthew leaves out almost everything that's become so familiar to us from Luke's Gospel. There's nothing of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. There are no shepherds in the field, no choirs of angels, not even a manger. There's just a godly man faced with a difficult decision. Should he take an apparently unfaithful woman for his wife or reject her? No one would blame him if he chose to reject her. She would suffer, but his honor

would be spared.

But God had something better in mind, revealed by an angel in a dream, something no one could have imagined. Mary is not an adulteress, but a virgin and the mother of God's own Son, Jesus the Messiah. Joseph hears the angel. He considers the Scripture and he believes. And because he does, you and I have a Savior.

Joseph's dream was prophecy. The child in Mary's womb was the Son of God who would save his people from their sins. That changed everything for Joseph. He took Mary home as his wife, Jesus was born into the line of David just as promised, and you and I by faith in this child are saved.

Perhaps its time for *us* to dream. Maybe not quite like Joseph, but a dream in which you and I and all of humanity embrace Jesus as Savior, crucified for sinners, raised from the dead, and coming again to redeem his own. May this be the effect of God's Word on each of us.