



Daring obedience

MATTHEW 1:18-25



Opening

Think of a time when you made a difficult decision. What were some positive and negative outcomes of your decision? Do you have regrets about your decision?

In Matthew 1 we learn that Joseph is not Jesus' biological father, but will raise him as his own. Joseph struggles to make the right decision in a difficult situation.

Understanding God's Word

Joseph is one of the New Testament's underappreciated heroes. He seems fated to take a back seat to the profound and poetic teenager he married. Nevertheless, there is much to admire about this careful, obedient, and dogged man. Caught up in events that are larger than history, troubled by dreams that order him to marry, to flee, to return and relocate, Joseph always rises in the morning with his face set toward obedience. In an unconventional act of daring obedience, he accepts God's call to play a supportive role in raising a child with a unique mission. Following the birth narratives, Joseph disappears from the Gospel's story.



For the leader

In keeping with the Matthew 1 text, invite people to tell something interesting about someone in their family lineage.

1. If this is the first gathering, talk about your expectations and hopes for the group.

2. Pray for openness to God's surprising and unpredictable movement in your life.

3. Have three readers (narrator, angel, prophet) read the text while others listen. Then invite each person to identify a key word or phrase that was meaningful. Do not discuss these words.

Connecting with God's Word

A righteous man (1:18-19)

This story begins with Joseph, a “righteous” man from Nazareth, facing an anguishing dilemma, which for him has no acceptable resolution. He is “pledged” to Mary, likely a teenage woman of the village. This betrothal is a formal agreement between the two families involved, the first stage of the marriage itself.

The marriage has been initiated, but Joseph and Mary have not yet consummated their relationship as husband and wife. In this time of high anticipation, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. Joseph can only imagine the worst—Mary’s unfaithfulness. Matthew tells his readers that Mary is pregnant “through the Holy Spirit.” But all Joseph knows is that his wife is pregnant and he is not the father. Jewish law is clear about how to deal with such situations (Deuteronomy 22:23-27), and the legal outcomes are not kind.

There are no good answers in sight for Joseph. His “righteousness” obliges him to uphold the Jewish law. To be righteous means to be just, to do the right thing in a given situation. In this context it means that Joseph is not willing to subject Mary to public disgrace. He must treat everyone with compassion and respect, even one whom he suspects has betrayed him. There is only one option, as Joseph sees it—a quiet divorce. In reality, it would have been difficult for Joseph to do this. He and Mary lived in a small town where everyone knew everyone else’s business. Perhaps this is why it took some time for Joseph to decide what to do.

Joseph’s high standard of ethical conduct is grounded in the Hebrew Bible. It appears that he integrated what he learned, most probably, in the local synagogue. His behavior indicates that he has been schooled in the ethics of grace.

- Joseph struggles deeply with questions of morality, ethics, and personal identity. What struggles do we face in our world of complex and challenging realities?
- What are the habits of a “righteous” person living in our times?
- What would you include in a curriculum for teaching an “ethic of grace”?

Joseph’s call (1:20-24)

Joseph changes his mind as a result of a dream. In ancient times, some people believed that God communicated through dreams. Joseph is told that he should not be afraid to take Mary to be his wife. Of what would he be afraid? Perhaps that she will be unfaithful to him in the future or that people would think that he was not as righteous as he appeared to be.

In formulaic language, Joseph is told about Mary’s child and to name the

child Jesus, which means, “he delivers (or saves).” The child will save people, not from Rome or outside enemies, but from their own sins, and from those things that prevent people from being fully what God intended them to be. Furthermore, this event represents a fulfillment of prophecy from the time of Isaiah, of the birth of a child who will be named Emmanuel. This symbolic name affirms the presence of God among God’s people.

Joseph accepts the dream as God’s word, marries Mary, and becomes a father to Jesus. He is not a major player in Matthew’s Gospel but without him, the story of Jesus would be quite different. Joseph willingly plays a supporting role. The fine qualities that he displays make him an ideal dad for Jesus.

- Do you pay attention to your dreams? If so, how have dreams influenced your life?
- Identify individuals in your congregation who are fulfilling their calling to a supportive role. Are they being affirmed in meaningful ways?
- Sometimes it feels that our contributions are underappreciated or not recognized. How can we validate ourselves?

Daring Obedience (Matthew 1:24-25)

In this story, Joseph changes from a desperate man with an anguishing plan of action to an obedient man with a daring plan of action. What changes him? He hears the message of the angel, decides to trust God, and responds in obedience to God’s call. It’s a daring act to dream God’s dreams and to awake into God’s new reality. God’s unconventional actions call for unconventional responses.

- How can we get ready for God’s unpredictable and powerful actions in our world?
- What might God be calling you, your congregation or the wider church to dare to obey?

Closing

1. Joseph is a model for daring obedience. Share one insight you gained from this text that will help you live out your calling this week.
2. Give this sending blessing to each other: *Do not be afraid for God is among us. Dare to live boldly in God’s new reality.*

DEVOTIONALS

Devotional 1

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.
—Matthew 1:19

In *Mornings with Henri J. M. Nouwen*, Nouwen writes: “The blessed one always blesses. And people want to be blessed . . . No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations or blaming . . . it calls forth only darkness, destruction and death. As ‘the blessed ones’ we can walk through the world and offer blessings.”

Joseph’s actions qualify him as a blessed one. In our age of scandalous talk shows and shocking news coverage, Joseph’s behavior seems extraordinary. He believes God’s angel who assures him that Mary’s pregnancy is sacred, not scandalous, because she is carrying the very Son of God. He has the moral fiber and inner strength to take care of Mary in a dignified way no matter what the neighborhood thinks!

Do I have that same strength of character? How can I be one of the blessed ones today? —Annie Lind

Lord, you have blessed us with the gift of Jesus. May we bless those we meet today.

Devotional 2

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. —Matthew 1:20

I’ve always assumed this is a comforting dream for Joseph because it gave clear direction from God. The dream convinces Joseph that Mary has not been unfaithful. But what about everyone else in the village? Will they make fun of Joseph?

We may covet such clear direction, but we need to be prepared for what God might say. It may mean undertaking something that no one around us will understand. What if God asks you to quit your good job and go on a mission assignment? Or to act lovingly toward someone who has publicly humiliated you? Or to sell your house at a fraction of its cost to a refugee family?

God did a new thing in the lives of Joseph and Mary that changed the course of history. God specializes in setting directions, new directions. I wonder what we will be dreaming tonight. —Carol Penner

Giver of dreams, give us courage to follow the dreams you send.

Devotional 3

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. —Matthew 1:20

When Joseph learns of Mary’s pregnancy, he is devastated and fearful. He does not know that God’s Spirit has intervened in their lives for a special purpose. However, he may have been familiar with another

conception story of divine intervention. At age 100, Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah learned from an angel that they would have a son.

God's intervention in Jesus' birth is even more amazing because Mary conceives without human involvement. This conception should not surprise us. In creation, the Spirit brought the material universe from nothing. God fashioned humans from the dust of the earth. Is it any more marvelous that God miraculously creates life in the womb of Mary, so it can be written, "The child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit"? —*Michael Dick*

God, we open ourselves to the miraculous power of your Spirit.

Devotional 4

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. —Matthew 1:20

In Jewish thought the Holy Spirit had a definite role: to bring God's truth to humankind and to serve as God's agent in renewing the soul. Matthew's account of the incarnation emphasizes that in Jesus the Spirit of God was operative in a powerful new way.

Jonah, a Chinese itinerant preacher, maintained an exhaustive schedule. He would carry 60 pounds of Bibles on his back as he cycled miles along bumpy roads to instruct house church leaders. On one visit he learned of a major dispute causing division in the congregation. He called the elders together. The atmosphere was tense as Jonah sat awhile in silence. Then, in tears, he cried, "Oh Lord, how we have dirtied your name."

Soon others began weeping. Conviction of sin, followed by repentance and confes-

sion, led to reconciliation. No issues were aired, no voices raised. The Holy Spirit had been at work. —*LaVerna Klippenstein*

Holy Spirit, dwell with us.

Devotional 5

[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. —Matthew 1:21

On Good Friday, the pastor projected a picture of Rembrandt's portrayal of Jesus on the cross, surrounded by an assortment of interested and curious bystanders. When asked to place myself somewhere among the onlookers I mused, "I want to be closer, rather than farther away."

We do not normally turn to the Passion for inspiration when we think of Jesus' birth. Yet this text evokes Jesus' lifelong mission, to bring salvation. Emmanuel, the other fitting name given to Jesus, means "God is with us." Our liberation from sin comes through God's coming among us.

In Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, God has lived among us as "Savior" and "Emmanuel."

In the drama of Jesus' advent and ministry, where do I place myself? Am I a disinterested bystander keeping my distance? Or am I standing nearby closely identified with him? —*Ken Seitz*

God with us, we accept your salvation and invite your presence in our lives.



Devotional 6

... and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." —Matthew 1:23

When I was born on January 21, 1950—two months premature, a tiny 3½-pound package of human life—my parents named me Dorothy Jean. This name came from two aunts: Dorothy Elizabeth, my mother's sister, and Velma Jean, my father's sister.

The meaning of my name is a special gift. Dorothy (the feminine form of Theodore) means "gift of God." And Jean (the feminine form of John) means "God is gracious." What better gift could I receive than the confession of faith reflected in this name? My life itself is nothing other than the gift of God. And the God who has gifted me with life is gracious. Here are name, confession, and calling sufficient for a lifetime. —Dorothy Jean Weaver

God of many names, thank you for your gift of life and love. As your daughters and sons, we know that you call us "Beloved."

Devotional 7

But [Joseph] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. —Matthew 1:25

Matthew's portrayal of Joseph's patience illustrates a profound trust in God's plan. Joseph and Mary did not consummate their marriage until Jesus was born. How patient Joseph was!

Very recently our family waited as my aged father completed his life. He could no longer eat or drink. He had lived a full life and was confident of his eternal resting place.

He constantly pointed upward toward a small sign above his bed that read, "Perhaps Today." The sign referred to Christ's second coming, but now it had added meaning. Dad was patient. We also needed to be patient as we waited.

What are you waiting patiently for? Possibly a loved one to commit to Christ, a child to make better lifestyle choices, an injustice to be addressed, or a church issue to be resolved?

Be patient in your waiting, for those who wait on God won't be disappointed (Isaiah 49:23). —David Wiebe

Patient One, our time is in your hands. What would you have us learn while we wait on you?

