

## THE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE – BEING FAITHFUL TAKES COURAGE

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**December 11, 2022**

During this Advent season – we are thinking about this this question: “*What will my Christmas experience be like this year?*” Every Christmas brings us new experiences plus new challenges, depending on what has happened over the last 12 months. To help us face Christmas this year, we are looking at the very first Christmas Experience, as we are trying to mesh together the events that took place 2000 years ago with the events that are taking place in our lives today. The Christmas story begins back in the first book of the Bible Genesis, with the promise of a deliverer who would crush the head of Satan. And then in Genesis 12 the history of the Jewish nation, the chosen people of God, begins with Abraham through whom the Promised Messiah would come, the Messiah of the world will be Jewish. Abraham is blessed by God to be a blessing to the nations of the world, but throughout their history, they didn’t feel blessed by God, and were definitely not a blessing to the other nations around them. When Jesus was born, the Israelites were at a particularly low point: they felt abandoned by God who had been silent for 400 years, they were occupied and ruled by Rome, living under heavy taxation, and also under the burden of their religious leaders with all of their rules. The people needed a Messiah now like never before, and then Jesus was born to a peasant couple in Bethlehem!

The first Sunday of Advent we looked at – how the Jewish nation (Israel) had been waiting for centuries for their Messiah to come and deliver them from the oppression of the Romans. And then, when everything was in place, at just the right time, God sent His Son to this earth on a specific date that was marked on His calendar, which was the right time politically, culturally, morally, and spiritually, and as God sent His Son the first time, God will send His Son back to earth a second time, at a future date that is also marked on God’s calendar.

The second Sunday of Advent – we looked at the story of a young Jewish girl named Mary – who was chosen by God to bear the Messiah, but was greatly troubled by the angel Gabriel’s words, thinking, “*How can anyone possibly be the mother of the Messiah?*” Mary’s gentle humble spirit drew the favour of God, reminding us that God can only work through a humble servant who is willing to say YES to God, regardless of the challenges and difficulty of the task before them! Thereby, the Christmas story tell us that we need to become like “*God’s*

*humble servant, Mary,*” willing to accept whatever God calls us to do in serving Him and serving others, regardless of the challenges and difficulties, hardships that may come with that calling.

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent – I want us to look at Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, who is probably the most ignored character in the Christmas story. Joseph seems to be a very minor character; however, we need to realize that Joseph was also specifically chosen by God for a very important task that, like Mary, also required special qualities and sacrifice. The important role chosen by God for Joseph was to be “*the faithful one;*” faithful to his fiancée Mary in protecting her from “*public disgrace,*” by doing the right thing in marrying her, plus to be “*the faithful one*” to his adopted son, Jesus, by accepting Him as his own son and protecting Him from jealous King Herod’s furious rampage in killing “*all the boys in Bethlehem and vicinity who were two years old and under.*” This evil act may seem unbelievable to us but looking back to God’s words to the serpent in Genesis that day in the Garden, Satan has been waiting and watching for this offspring of the woman that would defeat him to arrive, and now that the Promised Son has arrived, the devil would do everything within his power to eliminate this threat, and God has chosen Joseph to play an important part in protecting Jesus, and giving God’s son a loving home to grow into His calling to save the world from sin.

We are also told by Matthew that God used Joseph to fulfill prophecy – Joseph and his family’s escape to Egypt, to live as refugees until Herod’s death, and then return after Herod’s death to the land of Israel was prophesied by Hosea, “*Out of Egypt I called my son*” (Hosea 11:1). It was also prophesied that Jesus would be raised out of the public limelight, in this out-of-the way northern town called Nazareth, learning His father’s trade of carpentry, until the age of around thirty, when He would start His public ministry. What I want us to focus on this morning is this: being faithful to God’s calling on our lives takes courage. Joseph had to be a person of courage to carry out the role God had for him to raise and protect His Son when Jesus was helpless and vulnerable!

Joseph was a carpenter and, as such, most likely a simple and practical man. He would have loved the feel of wood and stone in his hands, having the satisfaction of building something sound and useful. We can also imagine that, like Mary, he envisioned an orderly and ordinary life of pursuing his craft, maintain a good name in the community, faithfully serve God by attending his local synagogue, and raise

a family like the many generations before him, but then came the devastating news that his fiancée Mary was pregnant, and the dream that would change his life forever.

Remarkably, there were to be at least three supernatural dreams in Joseph's life. The first dream came at a time of anger and humiliation. In shock and disbelief, Joseph had to deal with the obvious pregnancy of his fiancée. At marriage, Mary was expected to be a virgin, and premarital motherhood would be a public disgrace and scandal. Everyone would wrongly assume that Joseph was the father. Matthew tells us that Joseph's intention was to gently break off the engagement – which would have been a reasonable and gracious response in such a crisis to the one he loved and didn't want to bring public ridicule. However, in a dream, an angel instructed him to have the courage to be faithful to Mary: ***“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”*** (Matthew 1:20-21).

When Joseph awoke – I'm sure he had lots to think about. Assuming the words of the angel were true, that this child was truly the Messiah, how would he handle all those townsfolk who would laugh and jeer at him? And then, how was he, a lowly peasant, supposed to parent a future king? And what kind of wife was he marrying, anyway, who God considered, ***“highly favoured”*** and ***“blessed among women?”*** There would be more dreams for Joseph to come – telling him to flee to Egypt with his little family, and then to return again to Israel and establish a home back in Nazareth, where the child would be safe. This working blue collar man of wood and stone had now become a man of dreams and destiny. A man of courage who would carry out faithfully God's extra-ordinary calling on his life. This man who had dreamed of raising his own family in obscurity, was now called to be an adoptive father to the Son of God, who would change world history!

Why Joseph? It seemed that God needed a blue collar carpenter to fulfill his plan, a man who was sturdy, stable, and practical, yet sensitive to the voice of God. God needed a man of courage who would stand quietly with a young virgin who would become an object of ridicule, yet who carried in her womb the hope of the world. Joseph was strong but compassionate; he was able to lead the tiring expedition to Bethlehem and to the stable; he was able to love and encourage the mother of

Christ in her time of greatest need; and he was able to accept Jesus as his son, who would always be known and looked upon as his illegitimate child!

I can sympathize with Joseph and his dilemma when I try to walk in his sandals – when he hears from Mary that God got her pregnant, of course, Joseph would have naturally felt betrayed by Mary, how could this happen when she had pledged herself to him, in being faithful and pure? How could she become pregnant with another man’s child, knowing full well that Joseph would be humiliated by everyone in Nazareth? How would he explain this to his family and friends? Joseph was facing a huge problem, how would he save face, and not lose the respect of those around him. As well, this could be bad for business as Joseph was just starting out his carpentry business; he could lose all his customers over this scandal. I see Joseph as an innocent victim in this story. Was God treating Joseph in a loving way, as he didn’t sign up for this great challenge that he was now facing. Joseph wasn’t visited by the angel Gabriel, preparing him for what God was about to do and like Mary accept the challenge; instead, the news came as a shock, right out of the blue. We are never told how Joseph found out the truth, but I’m sure he wasn’t experiencing the peace that Mary may have experienced after the angel left her. All Joseph knew was that his fiancée was pregnant, and his family, friends and the townsfolks would think of him as the village idiot. His life was a mess, and he couldn’t control his situation. Joseph’s normal life was unravelling, because God had chosen Joseph to be the earthly father for His Son!

You will notice that we don’t ever hear anything negative about Joseph – not even close; instead, he is portrayed as a righteous man who wanted to do what is right. Matthew tells us in **verse 19**, ***“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law (just, righteous, godly), and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”*** Matthew’s point here is that Joseph was a devout, religious man, who followed the teaching of the Torah (Old Testament), who went to the synagogue, who prayed and most likely fasted, who didn’t eat unclean food, who didn’t mix with the wrong kinds of people, who didn’t keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra dollars. Joseph would have been seen as an upright, devote young Jewish man within the community, respected as a faithful follower of God (Yahweh).

Being a devote follower of God (Yahweh), Joseph would have known what the Torah said about the situation that he found himself in, with a pregnant fiancée. This would have greatly troubled him because he knew what God’s Law said.

**Deuteronomy 22** covers this type of marriage violation, being very specific on how it should be handled: *“If a woman pledged to be married is unfaithful, the penalty is death by stoning.”* What was Joseph going to do? God’s Old Testament Law was clear – and Joseph’s good reputation was on the line; however, because of his compassion for Mary, Joseph thinks about Mary above himself, not wanting her to get hurt. So, Joseph decides to *“divorce her quietly,”* which would have saved his reputation, and taken him out of the picture, but would have still left Mary dealing with this huge problem on her own. The stress on Joseph must have been unbearable. The sleepless nights. The endless questions running through his mind as he tries to make sense of it all. In this messy situation orchestrated by God, what would have happened to Mary and baby Jesus if Joseph went through with his original plan to *“divorce her quietly?”* But then God stepped in by sending an angel!

I have a few questions here: *“Why did God make Joseph wait and struggle with all of this stuff?”* *“Why didn’t God send the angel earlier to explain everything as He had done for Mary, to relieve him of all this worry, anxiety, and sleepless nights? Why did God put Joseph through all this stress?”* Possibly, God was testing and preparing Joseph to have the courage to be the right kind of father in raising His Son, the Messiah! Matthew tell us that thankfully God stepped into the situation with a dream. God finally speaks into the situation and brings Joseph peace and the courage to do what God required of him!

**Verse 24** is probably the most important verse in this whole passage, *“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.”* Joseph never hesitated to follow obediently what God had told him to do. That is something we need to pay attention to in the Christmas story, because the danger for us in hearing what God wants us to do, is in doing something different, or dragging our heels, and we are all guilty in both of these areas. We don’t always follow God’s instructions immediately and obediently, as we tend to be good procrastinators and second guessers of what God is telling us to do! God speaks and then the excuses begin: *“Did God really say that? Was that really God speaking to me? God wants me to do what? I’m not gifted or qualified to do what God is asking me to do!”* However, with all of our excuses, I think we all know, deep down within our soul, what God requires of us. Matthew tells us that Joseph didn’t second guess God but did exactly what the angel told him to do, because deep down in his heart he knew it was the right thing to do, and he wanted to be faithful to God’s calling upon his life. So, Joseph

immediately took Mary home to be his wife, which most likely brought tremendous relief to Mary. Now she would have a husband to help her deal with this difficult task – Mary would not have to bear her burdens alone!

In **verses 22-23 & 25** Matthew adds some other important facts about the Christmas story: ***“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).”*** And then, to make sure this would all take place as prophesied, Joseph also had a very important part to play, ***“But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus”*** (verse 25). God had chosen the right man for the job! Joseph did his part to fulfill the Old Testament scriptures, so that a virgin would give birth to the Messiah!

What I find both interesting and challenging in the story of Joseph – is that when he accepted the challenge to be the earthly father of Jesus, most of the circumstances in which he found himself in were out of his control. He was being forced into something he didn't expect or sign up for. Joseph didn't know why God choose him for this important role in being the earthly father of His Son. And Joseph especially didn't realize how he had entered this spiritual warfare between Satan and the Son of God, and how he would be instrumental in this spiritual battle in protecting Jesus from the evil schemes of the devil. Which tells me that, much like Joseph, when we accept Jesus, we as well are entering a spiritual battle with the demonic realm for our families, our church, and our communities. And like Joseph, there are circumstances in our lives that we didn't expect and can't change, but how we handle those circumstances can make all the difference to our families, and those around us. There are eternal implications to the decisions and choices we make! Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a famous prayer that can help us out here, the prayer is called, *“The Serenity Prayer”* and begins in this way:

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.**

When we look at Joseph's situation, he couldn't change the fact that his fiancée Mary was pregnant and it wasn't his child, plus the fact that his family, his friends, and the townsfolks would think the worst about him and Mary. Joseph couldn't change the fact that now he was trust into a spiritual battle with the demonic realm

that wanted Jesus eliminated. However, there were certain things that he had control over: his attitude towards the whole situation, and the courage to do what God wanted him to do in becoming a husband to Mary, and the father and protector of Jesus. And lastly, he needed the wisdom to know the difference between those things that he had the power to change and those he didn't, and then choose wisely and act according to God's plans. Joseph acted by taking the right approach in first bringing all of this to God in prayer, and possibly fasted as well, before he did something that he would later regret, and God answered his prayer by sending an angel to help Joseph know what he needed to do. However, Joseph still had to act on what the angel told him, which took courage and would be costly. Joseph had to die to himself and his dreams to be used by God!

God may be asking something of each one of us to do that will take courage – as we are also called to serve Him, as well as to serve others in a way that may be difficult or challenging and take us out of our comfort zones. What we are called to do as believer always requires sacrifice and a dying to self as we enter the spiritual battle raging around us. God was calling Joseph to holiness and righteousness and that took great courage and steadfastness to God's calling in the situation he was facing. It was prophesied that the Messiah would be born to a virgin, which means that Joseph, when he took Mary as his wife, could not consummate their marriage, which was his right according to the Jewish customs – back in that day the marriage wasn't considered legally binding until there was proof of the consummation. I greatly admire Joseph because He was obedient to the Scriptures, faithful in following God's Word to the letter. This is something that I want to highlight in the Christmas story, because today the Canadian church has lost its courage and faithfulness in following the absolute truth of God's Word, in standing against the ungodliness around us!

Today, the Canadian church is in decline and struggling in numerous ways and we need to put the blame on the church itself. YES, society is forcing us farther-and-farther to the edge, with the intention of eliminating our voice and influence completely. And YES, the number one goal of the enemy is to eradicate Christianity and the devil has infiltrating all parts of our society to carry out his evil plan! YES, we are seeing it's effects in our public schools where our children and grandchildren are being indoctrinated into unbiblical thinking as they are twisting the truth, and confusing them about their sexual identity, as the rights of the parents are being taken away to question or intervene. And then our government's sanctioning of abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and

socialism is eroding society at an alarming rate. And YES, the Western world has become post-Christian under our watch, with large numbers born after 1980 rejecting religious faith, rebelling against the faith of their parents and grandparents all because the church has largely been silent over the last forty years. The problem has been that believers are like the unaware frog that is being boiled alive one degree at a time!

What I find especially troubling is the rise of progressive Christianity. What I mean by that is Christian leaders and denominations that are imitating culture, rather than imitating Christ, causing many of our churches to buy into all of this false teaching and half truths that are so prevalent around us. They don't want to speak out against the ungodliness around them, because they don't want to offend anyone, not wanting to be seen as judgmental and unloving. However, even though I know that God is love and loves this world, I often find God's Word and Jesus' teaching highly offensive at times, because God hates all sin and doesn't want us to live in sin. The Gospel message points out our sins to bring us to repentance and back to a loving relationship with God. We saw this begin to happen years ago in the United Church and now it has infiltrated every denomination. But Christ warned us that this would happen in the end times. Near the end of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned: ***“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits”*** (Matthew 7:15-16). These false teachers are among us and are lowering our view of the Bible, claiming that it's not accurate, authoritative, and inspired (God-breathed). They question the absolute truth of God's Word as they are being influenced and persuaded by the LGBTQ+ agenda, and by those that have a low regard for the sanctity of human life, condoning abortion and euthanasia, and by those that are promoting a socialist state, wanting to control every aspect of our lives, creating a society of puppets who blindly follow the new world order!

Today, God is calling His church to holiness and righteousness – we are living in times in which we have to uphold the absolute truth, and that will take courage, because as we align our views with what Jesus taught, we will be persecuted, even by those within our churches. And no denomination is safe, we are all facing difficult days ahead, but Jesus said we should expect that, ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you”*** (John 15:18). Jesus also told His followers to expect tribulation in this life but also encourages us by telling us to take heart because He has overcome the world (John 16:33) and God laughs at the

nations who conspire against Him (Psalm 2). As well, in **Matthew 5:10** Jesus encourages us with these words, ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** Over the coming years Satan will turn up the heat, society around us will demand more-and-more compromise from us as believers and the costs of being countercultural will be high. The Christmas story reminds us that the cost was high for both Joseph and Mary, but they were willing to pay the price in bringing us the saviour of the world. The question for us will be – are we willing to pay the price in being Kingdom people by standing against all of the ungodliness around us, and shine the light of God’s absolute truth into the darkness!

Christian journalist Rod Dreher, writes this in his book *LIVE NOT BY LIES*, *“A time of painful testing, even persecution is coming. Lukewarm or shallow Christians will not come through with their faith intact. Christians today must dig deep into the Bible and church tradition and teach themselves how and why today’s post-Christian world, with its self-centeredness, its quest of happiness and rejection of sacred order and transcendent values, is a rival religion to authentic Christianity. We should also see how many of the world’s values have been absorbed into Christian life and practice. Then we must judge how the ways of the world, and its demands, conflict with what Christ requires of his disciples. Are we admirers, or followers? How will we know? We will know when we act – or fail to act – as Christians when to be faithful costs us something”* (page 162).

The story of faithful Joseph’s courage tells me that whatever situation I may be facing this Christmas, there are things I have no control over, and then there are things I can speak into and help to bring about change, that is if I have the courage and willingness to step out in faith. As well, Joseph’s story tells me that I can have both peace and joy in the midst of a chaotic out of control world or in my own personal chaotic world, if I take everything before God in prayer, letting Him speak into those difficult situations, helping me to discern the truth; thereby, make the right choices and right decisions, regardless of the cost, as a faithful follower of Christ Jesus!

Reinhold Niebuhr ends his *“Serenity Prayer”* with these wonderful words about the attitude that we need to have:

**Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace;**

**Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will;  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him  
forever in the next.      Amen.**