

JOY: FINDING GOD'S WAY
Matthew 1:18-25

(Read Matthew 1:18-25)

Intro: When I was 12 or 13, just about now in December, our dad showed up at the dinner table with a cut on his upper lip. Being his curious offspring, my little brothers and I asked him what had happened and he, matter of factly, told us our mother had punched him in the mouth. We said “Oh.” And life went on. We never doubted his story. We trusted him that much. And we never questioned why Mother would have done such a thing – if she had to punch him, well, then who were we to question?

Now, mind you, we did not have violent parents. They not only never laid a hand on one another, but they would never have even considered it. But Kent, Steve, and I accepted Daddy’s explanation for his split lip – I don’t even remember being puzzled about it – probably he had that mischievous Daddy grin that showed he was up to something.

Then on Christmas day, when we found an 8 foot toboggan at the Christmas tree, Daddy came clean. He explained that he had bought the toboggan a couple weeks before he had stashed it in the garage at the oil burner business where he worked. And as he took it out of the trunk of his 1966 Mercury the bungie cord holding the lid down had popped off (as they are prone to do) and bashed his upper lip. Ahaa! So Mother hadn’t punched Daddy in the mouth after all!

All this to say – we trusted Daddy’s word and believed him even though it made no sense at all. And so it is with God. His way is the best way, even if it doesn’t make complete sense at the time. Two weeks ago we talked about the annunciation of Mary where she was told by the angel that even though she had not had sexual relations with any man, let alone her fiancé Joseph, she would be giving birth to a son. Regardless of the angel’s words, the idea was overwhelming, frightening and just plain confusing, but she still said “*I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.*” Luke 1:38. She trusted God’s word and his plan.

In the familiar passage that I just read, Joseph was ready to end his engagement to Mary because she was pregnant and he was not the father of the child she was carrying. An angel came to him as well and explained that Mary had not been unfaithful. In fact she had been supremely faithful in her obedience to God’s call on her life. He too, trusted God and his plan.

Both Mary and Joseph would face hardship and even heartache in their role as the earthly parents of God the Son, but, in the end, they experienced the Joy of following God’s plan. They trusted and joy followed.

Think about it. How ready are we do to what God wants, no matter what? There is great joy in it. Let’s learn how that can be reality. First . . .

There is joy in knowing that God’s way is not always our way. (Matthew 1:18-19)

- Our verses point out that Joseph meant to divorce Mary quietly. He had every right to, it was right there in black and white in Jewish law. In fact, he could have had her put to death. But God’s plan supersedes human laws and plans. If he didn’t think of it right away, I’m sure Joseph realized it later as he thought of the truth in Isaiah’s words, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*” declares the Lord. Isaiah 55:8.
- Just think about it. The arrival of a baby should be good news but when you look at it from a human standpoint, it was scandalous. But from God’s point of view it was right on cue.
- I need to take a bit of an aside here that impacts our understanding of the coming of Christ into humanity. It has to do with the Virgin Birth.
 - A couple weeks ago I was discussing with a colleague how we select our preaching material for the holidays and how we keep it fresh from year to year. I told him how, over the past several years, we have used materials from the Wesleyan Church as a resource. As the Holy Spirit infuses it, we can bring insight to an old and beautiful story. My colleague shared that he has been using his own denomination’s material but this would likely be his last year because he has noticed that more and more, the Virgin Birth was being ignored. It seems that many theologians think that the idea is not valid.
 - My question is – if it is in the two Gospels that provide Jesus’s birth narrative, then how can it not be valid or true. It’s the problem of humans thinking that God cannot act outside of his creation. Or as

one person asks, “*Could a God who spoke the universe with its countless galaxies into existence be unable to cause a virgin to conceive?*”

- But why is it a big deal? Why a virgin birth? David Mathis of Desiring God writes this
“Matthew and Luke wrote the authoritative accounts. Neither was likely to be gullible in the least. Matthew was a former tax-collector. Luke was a doctor. True—medicine has come a long way in twenty centuries, but it isn’t a recent discovery that virgins don’t have babies. From the very beginning of Jesus’ human life, his eternal Father set him apart as exceptional. The Gospel writers didn’t concoct a myth. Luke even consulted with Jesus’ mother who confirmed that Jesus’ birth was supernatural.
In his masterful work The Person of Christ, Donald Macleod writes, “The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas; and none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.”
And then later he quotes N. T. Wright who said “[F]irst-century folk knew every bit as well as we do that babies are produced by sexual intercourse. When, in Matthew’s version of the story, Joseph heard about Mary’s pregnancy, his problem arose not because he didn’t know the facts of life, but because he did.”
- Joseph knew about the facts of life – he knew how babies are made. His wife to be was pregnant, that means she had been with a man. Except she had not been. The angel said so, and Joseph accepted that truth – that the Holy Spirit had caused his wife to be pregnant. God’s ways are not our ways.
- So why is the virgin birth important to the Christian faith? Jesus Christ, God’s Son, had to be free from the sinful nature passed on to all other human beings after the Fall of Adam and Eve. Because Jesus was born of a woman, he was a human being; but as the Son of God, Jesus was not conceived in sin, to put it into Psalm 51 terms; instead, conceived of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is both fully God and fully human. The infinite, unlimited God took on the limitations of humanity so he could live and die for the salvation of all who believe in Him. Because Jesus lived as a man, we know that he fully understands our experiences and struggles (Hebrews 4:15-16). Because he is God, he has the power and authority to deliver us from sin (Colossians 2:13-15). There is nothing we experience that he has not already been through and overcome. Without the miracle of the virgin birth, there would not have been a perfect Sacrificial Lamb who would die, once and for all, for the forgiveness of sin.
- F. B Meyer writes, “*That which happened historically and miraculously, must happen experientially. In each of us Jesus must be born through the direct action of the Holy Spirit.*”
- This then is a cause for great joy for us even though it must have been it no-doubt cause great confusion and hardship for Joseph and Mary.
- Okay, that was a long but needed aside. Let me wrap this up with a few more quick points. . .

There is joy in knowing that God’s way always saves. (Matthew 1:20-21)

- The angel assured Joseph to not be afraid of the consequences of his obedience. After all, the name he was to give the baby, was Jesus. The name Jesus means what? “The Lord Saves!” It always has and always will. Jesus always saves and brings life. Satan is the one who always steals, kills and destroys. Joseph decided to follow God’s plan. He made the right decision.
- When facing big decisions a lot of people falter. “What if I decide wrong? What if I miss God’s will? What if...?” To make good decisions, first take all these worries and put them under God’s promise: God cares for you, watches over you and guides your steps. Joseph came to the best decision he could, but God had other plans and made them clear. Most of our decisions will not be overruled by angels, but that’s no reason for lacking confidence. To make good decisions, pray. Evaluate all of the options. Talk with trusted friends. Then act in faith. God is with you and cares for you, every step.
- Here’s another thing . . .

There is joy in knowing that God’s ways always promise God’s presence. (Matthew 1:22-23)

- Immanuel – it’s that name again that we hear a lot at Christmas but it’s true every day – it means “God is with us.”
- God was with Mary and Joseph. That is how they could embark on their journey of life together with confidence.
- God is with us too. In fact, as we just sang, God’s presence brings us great joy and it’s great indeed. And as we saw last week, we have peace as well – even when his ways don’t seem to make a bit of sense to us to what our culture dictates as acceptable. That was the way it was for Joseph and Mary, but then again they came to realize, as we must that . . .

There is joy even in knowing that God’s ways almost always require risk. (Matthew 1:24)

- Joseph put his life and reputation on the line when he decided to do things God’s way. He changed his own plans quickly after learning about God’s plan. He obeyed and reinstated his plan to marry Mary. Regardless of what others would not doubt think, Joseph went ahead with what he knew was right. He went with God’s way of doing things.
- How often do we avoid doing what is right because of what others might think. We need to emulate Joseph and Mary and go with God’ plan. Of course there is always great risk in following God’s way from a human perspective, but the risk is worth it in exchange for the joy we receive from being in God’s will. Even when we realize that . . .

There is joy in knowing God’s way almost always requires sacrifice. (Matthew 1:25)

- Joseph did what God wanted, even though it could have cost him everything – even his impending marriage with Mary. And, when you think about it, he could have been accused of fornication according to Jewish law and he AND Mary could have been put to death by stoning. But they weren’t. Instead the family was probably subjected to ridicule because Jesus was seen as illegitimate. In fact, one of the times when he backed some religious leaders into a corner they retorted “We are not illegitimate children” (John 8:41) perhaps implying “At least we’re not illegitimate like you are! Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, Boo, Boo!” Suffice it to say, going God’s way was not an easy thing for Jesus’s earthly parents.
- And so it is for us, God’s way is not always easy – but it’s good because it’s right. We open up the potential for God’s richest blessings when we are willing to sacrifice our hopes and plans in order to do things God’s way.

Conclusion: Joy! We sing about it and think that it is an automatic reality at Christmas. But, real joy only comes from following God’s way. We may try to manufacture happiness and joy, but it will only come to us as we go to God and submit to his plan for our lives. God cares for us and watches over and guides our steps. Joseph came to the best decision of obedience and surrender to God’s plan and made his choice clear as it is for us, Immanuel – God is with us.

Regardless of the surrounding circumstances and feelings – sing: “Joy to the World” knowing that Jesus has come to be with us and for each and every day – no matter what! That’s what finding God’s way means. Amen.