

“THE VOICE OF JOSEPH”
Matthew 1:18-25
CHRISTMAS EVE, December 24, 2020

What a nightmare this year has been, wouldn't you agree? Wow! I mean, WOW! Such highs and lows with not much in between. I can hardly believe all the things that have happened to me, to us. Who would have thought that we would have ended up in Egypt again? Our ancestors were there for 430 years, serving as slaves to the Pharaohs. I didn't ever think that we would ever return to Egypt. Oh, but I get ahead of myself. Let me start with the beginning of this whole nightmare.

I had just started my business in Nazareth as a young man straight out of apprenticeship when I had the chance to find a beautiful young woman who agreed to become my wife. She was quite young, so I had to get her parent's permission in order to marry her. Ha, yes, that is her name, Mary. I was excited about the whole proceedings, and the engagement time started. We did things quite a bit different than you do them today – there was an arrangement between my father and Mary's father, and I paid the bridal price for her hand in marriage. It was agreed upon, but Mary still lived with her family for another year. Yet we were counted as a couple, since the wedding was the least important part of the whole process.

Things seemed to be moving along well. HOWEVER, one day changed everything. Mary came by and said that we had to talk. She told me about a strange experience she had, said she had been visited by an angel who told her she was favored by God. I knew she was a wonderful girl, but that was something else. She looked real worried and anxious about something so I asked her what was going on. She stated that when the angel visited her, he told her that she was going to become pregnant and have a baby. Well, I thought that was a good thing to have happen when we got married, but she said that the angel meant, BEFORE we were married.

Now I knew something was up. People don't just get visited by angels. Nor do they get pregnant before they get married, unless there is some unfaithfulness going on. I didn't think that Mary was that kind of girl. I thought she was pleased to be getting married to me. At least she didn't make a

fuss over anything when our parents finalized the arrangements. If she didn't want to get married to me, she should have let me know that right away.

But then she completely destroyed any hope that I had when she said that it wasn't going to be after we were married. She said she was already pregnant. Once more she told me that it was the angel who told her that she would have a son, and that we were to name Him, Jesus, because He was going to become a great king like our ancestor, David, son of Jesse, of Bethlehem. He would be a king forever, Mary went on. It's all part of what the angel told her.

This just kept getting more and more strange. How could I believe her? What was I to think? None of what she told me made much sense. Yes, we were both of the lineage of King David, but neither one of us was from royalty! In fact, both of our families were lower class workers, my family working in construction, and her family as farmers. How was that going to make this child a king?

And beyond that, how could she become pregnant when I was her husband and she was living with her family? How could she betray our engagement? Why would she have given herself to another man and still go through with our marriage? It was not going to work!

As you can see, I was completely confused. After Mary left, I could hardly contain myself. What was I going to do? Should I continue on with the engagement and claim the child as my own? Should I end our engagement and expose Mary to public dishonor and disgrace? What would that do to her family? What would it do to me? How could I get work if people thought that I was the father? That would change everything! What could I do? I didn't want to put Mary away, but I felt I had to in order to keep my reputation and hope for a future. But I wouldn't do it publicly; that would kill Mary, literally. There were laws against prostitution. I couldn't do that to her.

I got so tired out from debating with myself what to do that I fell into a fitful sleep that night. It was then that God provided an answer to all my struggle. An angel also visited me in my sleep, telling me not to worry about taking Mary as my wife, because the child in her was conceived from the Holy Spirit. God was bringing His Messiah into the world and He was using Mary as the one to make it

happen. She had not been unfaithful to me. Rather, because of her faithfulness to God, He had chosen her to be the mother of His own Son. His name would be Jesus, the “One Who Saves.” He would save our people from sin and separation from God. I was reminded of the old prophecy of Isaiah (7:14), that God would enable “*a virgin to conceive and bear a son, and his name would be called Immanuel.*”

Wow! Mary was right! There are angels, and they are messengers from God! What could I do, but be faithful to God and follow His instructions! That put my heart at ease and my mind to rest. No matter what would happen to us, I would take Mary as my wife, and she would give birth to Jesus, God’s own Son, our Messiah. I would do my very best to protect her and help her to accomplish this great thing that the Lord our God was calling her to do. Without my help, it would not be possible for her to fulfill God’s plan of saving our people.

But then, another twist in the whole works came as we were demanded to go back to our own ancestral home to be counted. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, wanted to count each person so that he could mandate another tax upon us. It was hard enough for us to make a living as it was, but now we had to pick up and go home to Bethlehem, because we were both from David’s lineage. Mary was already in her later months of her pregnancy, so I wanted to go alone. But she requested that she go with me, as the law stated that Everyone had to return to their own hometowns. Both of our families would be making this difficult trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem. What a bother!

We waited as long as we could but it had to be done. So we left Nazareth and painfully made our trip to Bethlehem, stopping in Jerusalem only to get a few more supplies that we needed. By the time we made it to the outskirts of town, however, Mary had gone into labor. It was already late, and it would not be long for Mary to give birth to Jesus, so I struggled to find somewhere where we could stay. But with everyone already in the town for the registration, there was no place left for us. All I could find was a small cave that brought protection from the wind. As it was, there were animals there, too. Not the most ideal place to have a baby. But we made do. Jesus was born in that stable, and since there was no place to give Him a decent bed, I fashioned an old feeding trough into a cradle for Him. It was

crude, but it worked. Not exactly the way I thought the Messiah would be born, but since no one would believe what we told them about Jesus, it was all we could do. And yet, it seemed that all the animals recognized our needs, and made room for us, and even stayed quiet so that little Jesus could sleep.

But we weren't alone for long. Soon, shepherds arrived, Shepherds! They seemed to seek us out and when they found Jesus, everyone came close to look at Him. Seems they, too, had been visited by not just one angel, but a whole army of them, telling them that the Savior of the world was born in Bethlehem that night. Imagine Mary's and my surprise about that.

Well the shepherds just couldn't get enough of Jesus, but they were respectful of the moment. And since Mary was so tired, not only from the trip but also from her labor, the shepherds soon went back to their flocks, but not before telling everyone they saw what God had told them. Most folks thought they were just silly, silly old shepherds, so no one else bothered us that night.

Soon the crowds of people left to return to their homes, having registered for the tax. We were able to find a place to live, a small home where Mary and Jesus could spend their time while I found work to support them. Being a man of many trades came in handy and I was able to find work.

According to our custom, it was important that we have "our son's" circumcision ritual. Eight days after He was born, we completed our instructions given by the angels by naming the Him, Jesus.

Then, after Mary's purification we went to Jerusalem so that we could dedicate Jesus to the Lord, since He was "our" first-born son. Once more we were surprised as an old man and an old widow came to us and praised God for bringing forth His Messiah, the Promised One who would bring salvation to all the people, even to the Gentiles! He would be the One who would bring freedom to Jerusalem.

A few months later, however, we were once more surprised by the visit of travelers from an eastern country. God had directed them to us by a star that they were "following." They said that this star was so unusual that they had to see what it was pointing to. Seems the star, to them, indicated the birth of royalty and they wanted to be among those who came to congratulate the king's family at the birth of his son. Surprising us once more, they honored us with costly gifts, gold, frankincense, and

myrrh. It was their tribute to the “new born king.” Gold, a fitting gift for royalty, frankincense, a festive fragrance celebrating new life, and myrrh, strangely, a medicinal perfume used to remove the stench of death. Strange gifts, once more focusing on Jesus being the One the angel announced would become the king and bring freedom to God’s people.

But that wasn’t the end of our saga of Jesus’ birth. Once more the angel of the Lord came to me in a dream warning me to take Mary and Jesus quickly away from Israel, because He was in danger from powerful people. Apparently King Herod did not take too kindly the birth of someone who could some day supplant his reign as king of Israel. So in the middle of the night, we quickly gathered what we could and departed for Egypt, out of the reaches of Herod and anyone who would want to do Jesus harm.

And that’s what brought us here to this ancient land of the Pharaohs again. But not for long! Just last night, I got another visit from the angel, who told me that it was safe to go home. Herod had died, so we had nothing more to fear from him. Oh, I look forward to returning home again, where we can settle down once and for all to raise Jesus without everyone trying to kill him. There is so much to do, so I must say farewell to you my friends.

Keep the faith. God is good. And Jesus is our Savior. Shalom!