

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Whose Child Is This?

Matthew 1:18-19

Rev. Tyler Amundson

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Matthew 1:18-19 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Over the next few weeks as take part in this season Christians call Advent, a time of preparing our mind, body, our entire selves for the coming of Christ, we will be studying the story of Joseph. Joseph is found in the gospels to be the earthly father of Jesus. We always seem to put that disclaimer in front of “father” for Joseph, of earthly, because we know that God was the father of Jesus too.

During this season I want to invite us to learn about Joseph for a few reasons and most of these are from a book that follows our study by Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton called *Faithful: Christmas through the eyes of Joseph*:

1. What can we learn about God from Joseph's story?
2. What can we learn about ourselves from Joseph's story?
3. How does Joseph shed light on the meaning of the Christmas story, the birth of Christ?
4. By focusing on one character of the birth of Jesus, can we allow ourselves the space to slow down and see our own place in the story of Christ's birth? What character or parts of characters do we see ourselves in?

Since Joseph was the father of Jesus I plan to start each of our sermons this season with a few bad dad jokes. Let's be honest if Joseph was a good father he told bad jokes just like every other good father I know.

- What drink always has a cold?
 - Cough-ee
- While most puns make me feel number,
 - Mathematic puns make me feel number...number.
- Why did the chicken cross the road, roll in the mud, and cross the road again?
 - Because he was a dirty double-crosser.

In February of 2017, Jimmy Fallon took over The Tonight Show. I remember watching Fallon that first night walk out and he didn't start with a lineup of skits. Instead he began by doing a monologue on his history. Who he was, and what he was about. Jimmy Fallon almost teared up talking about his children, two daughters. He shared his humble beginnings in a small town in New York state. Then he shared a simple story about how when he was a young boy he would stay up as late as his parents would let him to catch the monologue on the Tonight Show when Johnny Carson was the host. He joked that he usually would try and hide at the end of the couch as long as his parents wouldn't notice him, to see if he could watch one or two guests.

Then Jimmy Fallon said, each night I will come out here stand on this spot, and I will try and help you laugh. It feels like such an honor that I might be the person kids try to sneak out and sit on their couch next to their parents, to watch. Just like I got to do as a kid.

Jimmy Fallon's moments of tears over his kids and his honesty that his hope is to make America laugh each night, demonstrated the great intention with which he was hoping to go about his work. For me it demonstrated his character, by him being willing to risk his opening moments not trying to make us laugh, but letting us know he was human.

In our scripture we don't find Joseph being the best dad and husband right away, we find him being very human. At this point we know that Joseph has discovered that Mary is pregnant, and he has decided to call their engagement off quietly.

From what we read in both Luke and Matthew it appears that Mary told Joseph of her pregnancy on a trip to Bethlehem, his hometown. It seems from scripture that perhaps Mary went with Elizabeth after informing her, to journey to tell Joseph of what was going on.

Men tend to lean into the logical and rational thinking. It appears from scripture that Joseph did not listen to Mary at first. Instead, he assumed that bearing the child of God sounded pretty far-fetched. The author of our study, Adam Hamilton, shares that he has many people in his churches that struggle with the idea of Mary being a virgin.

Adam Hamilton says, that he does not struggle with the virginity of Mary. In fact in the face of all the great challenges in the world, with the number of creatures that reproduce asexually in the scope of life, Adam states that the virgin birth story seems like a fairly minor miracle. The importance of the virgin birth is there because it reminds us that God allowed Godself to be enfleshed in a human womb and body. God did not do this the easy way. God experienced the loneliness or connectedness of the womb, the harshness of birth and childhood, and the challenges of human life. Being conceived through the Holy Spirit is important if you value the understanding of God being born among us. Adam Hamilton says, “If you find yourself doubting this virgin conception, consider yourself in good company, Joseph didn’t believe it either.”

In ancient Jewish custom, the marriages were arranged and as soon as the girl hit puberty they would be married. Prior to the marriage the groom would pay two different sums of money. The mohar was paid to the bride’s father. This would help compensate for losing a member of his family who did part of the household work. This was not a small sum, in commentaries it is associated with the equivalent of a 1 bedroom house.¹ A large portion of the mohar was set aside for the bride as a sort of insurance policy, in case there was a divorce or the husband died.

¹ Hamilton, A. (2017). *Faithful: Christmas through the eyes of Joseph*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. Pg 46

Women in this time could become destitute and poor without this financial support, due to the discrimination from women having trade work. Additionally, Joseph would have paid another sum to the bride called the mattan. This is more equivalent to the wedding ring of today, there was an old adage that men should spend 3 months salary. The mattan was meant to provide for the woman, should something happen in the marriage.

I have worked with couples facing infidelity in their marriages. I have seen friends go through this. Joseph's emotions must have been running high. As people go through the potentials of infidelity they ask deep and challenging internal questions: What did I do wrong? How could they choose them over me? Can I ever trust them again? Is this the thing that could make me lose the person of my dreams, the one I loved deeply? People facing a feeling of betrayal tap into some of the deepest parts of our human fear, the fear of losing something that they see as a part of their life story.

Despite the fears that Joseph had that Mary might have betrayed him before marriage, the gospel writers sound confident that even then he intended to be kind to her by not humiliating her. In the legal systems he had every right to make a public statement of adultery, this would bring shame on her and her family. There was no DNA testing to see if in fact the child was God's, no one would have had evidence Mary did not betray Joseph. He in fact could have got much of his money back from the marital agreements if he let people know in public of her infidelity. However, he intends for her to keep the mohar and the mattan. He also intends to not humiliate her. Joseph chose gentle rightness over vengeance or legalism.

Have you ever met someone who has claimed to see an angel? I have, and I need to be honest, when I first hear the stories my brain immediately wonders if that person was or is in their right mind. Sometimes my mind even wonders that when people at a graveside service, claim that a beautiful bald eagle flying over was a sign of their

loved one sharing that God loved them. My scientific brain usually starts with one word, “coincidence.”

Here is the reality though, I have experienced angels. When I was young and in love, I was traveling to see Crystal when we lived apart. On the drive I got in a car accident in the middle of nowhere, in the part of Montana that goes on forever after Missoula before you get to the Idaho border. With no one close by, I wondered how I would get anywhere. Two amazing people, catholics as I recall, happened to see my accident. They offered me a ride the rest of the way. As I was shaken from car accident I remember the 2 hour ride being full of hearing their story of falling in love themselves, raising kids, and working hard at life. I saw them a few years later, and they would never take any official thanks with me, even when I offered to take them out to dinner. Two angels on a highway helping a young man journey where he needed to go.

Angels to me have been surprises on the highway, close friends in challenging times, family arriving when needed, and even medical professionals in times of crisis.

So to be honest I need to admit, angels do exist. And despite my brains best efforts to rationalize them away, I think they exist in many forms. In Greek, the language of the New Testament the word for Angel is *Angelos*, meaning messenger.

Again, men tend to be logical or rational. I wonder if this is why the angel who appeared to Joseph used a dream, because if it had just appeared in front of Joseph, Joseph might have assumed it was heat exhaustion.

Matthew 1:20-21 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁰As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the

child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

From this moment Joseph changes his intentions, and we see his character shine through. He leans into the mystery of what is going on and into being a father to this child Mary is bearing. Additionally, this experience is so powerful that Joseph receives instructions later in the gospels from Angels that keep Jesus safe from Herod, and allow Joseph to bring his family safely to their homeland later in the story. Joseph relies heavily on faith in a God who works in ways that are not of this earth throughout the story of Jesus’ young life.

Perhaps from what we see of Joseph being slow to anger and vengeance and his willingness to have his mind changed to follow the right path, we should not be surprised that Joseph quickly starts to raise a child that is not his own with care and compassion. It is still worth mentioning that Joseph’s character seems to be one of perseverance to raise Jesus. Joseph turn fully into this work of protecting Jesus and helping him grow.

How many of us turn away at first from the hard things God calls us to do?

It can be easier to turn into fear than to lean into the opportunities God places in front of us. For Joseph, raising a child not his own happened after he first doubted, then he leaned into the mystery, and then he embraced it.

Last week I shared that I ask for people to share on Facebook with me advice they got from their fathers. One of our church members wrote, “To be myself and not worry about what other people think, also to parallel park. He always took the time to listen.”

I wonder if Joseph didn’t accept the advice to be himself from his parent and that is why he could embrace the call of God to raise Jesus, a child

not his own. Then he taught Jesus' the equivalent of 1st century parallel parking, and listened to his son as he grew.

The person who posted this was Liz Stanhope a member of our church. Liz is one of our staff members, and her husband Jerry and her were adoptive parents. I interviewed them this week to ask them what it was like to raise a child not their own. Let me say before we hear from them, that I was struck from both of them not their disappointment in not having a child their own, but their pride in having the opportunity to raise a child.

Let's watch this video of them:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlRTvof0Ufw>

“God's doesn't make junk, you are loved.”

I wonder if this is not something Jesus' learned from Joseph growing up. I learned from Jerry and Liz something powerful, that connection I had for my biological children is something God programs into us all, the capacity for us to love, the character of us being loving creatures, is a gift God gives us to share.

Character of a person like Joseph mattered, I can only imagine it is why God chose him to be Jesus' father. Joseph's character helped to shape Jesus' into an adult. The characteristics of not being vengeful, of assuming the best in people and trying to do what is right, of being open to the mystery of God, and being willing to say “yes” to God.

The opening night as I watched Jimmy Fallon remind us that he was going to fulfill his purpose by being ready for the kid who might sneak in front of the TV, and his role was to make us laugh I was thankful to see his humanity. I think humanity is what Jesus was thankful to see in Joseph.

As Jesus watched Joseph, I bet there were times he saw him doubt, turn to mystery, and then say “yes” to God. I would imagine he saw Joseph choose rightness over anger and vengeance. I can imagine the father Joseph shaped Jesus’ life.

I wonder if Joseph is not what inspired Jesus to say on the cross, “Forgive them father for they know not what they do.”

If I have learned anything studying Joseph so far, the one who raised a child not his own is that when God asks us to do something for him, and we turn into it, we can’t imagine what God will do with our love. God can help us raise a child, change a life, and it might even change our life in the process.

As we continue to step closer to Christmas, I invite you to wonder with me, with Joseph, and with our God. What is God inviting you to say yes to, what messengers are being sent to you, even now? What aspect of your character is God hoping to use to change the world, by allowing you to adopt the love of Christ and foster its message into the world?

Shalom and Amen

