



## DOING THE UNTHINKABLE

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
December 12, 2004*

We're getting very close to Christmas now. This is the time when you really see the difference in perspective between kids and adults. At our house, Isaac has been talking about how he just can't WAIT for Christmas to arrive, while at the same time Karin has been panicking about how much shopping she still has to do and how little time is left. Same planet, different worlds.

A difference in perspective is what this morning is about. We ended last week with Mary singing because she was so happy to be having the baby, and this morning we come to Joseph who had a completely different perspective on events.

This month we've been looking at the messages of the Christmas angel, and today we're talking about the angel who came to Joseph, right when Joseph was ready to walk out.

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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."*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

I don't know if you've seen the latest issue of Newsweek, but they've devoted a huge article to the birth of Jesus, or as the subtitle says "How the story of Christmas came to be." Actually they never quite arrive at how it came to be, but they do spend a lot of time wrestling with the idea of a virgin having a baby, because it is just so implausible.

Joseph was no dummy. He knew how things work, and he was not buying the story Mary was telling either. Put yourself in his shoes. Your fiancée comes to you and tells you she is pregnant – but denies that she cheated on you. Even if you are deeply in love with her, you’re not going to fall for that one.

Even worse, you live in a small town and people are going to talk. They’re going to assume that YOU’RE the one who caused the whole problem, that you didn’t have the restraint to wait until the wedding, and that you got Mary pregnant. So now not only do you have to carry around the heartache of an unfaithful girlfriend – you get the public humiliation of being blamed for her condition.

From where we sit in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, it’s difficult to grasp the dilemma Joseph was in. In modern society, sex is treated so much more casually than it was in Jesus’ day. We say “What’s the big deal? Just marry her anyway.” But for Joseph, this was devastating news. Mary was now damaged goods, so to speak, and there was no hiding the evidence. The Bible describes Joseph as a righteous man, so Mary’s apparent violation of the law would have ripped him up inside. Who was this woman he was going to marry? Either she was really naïve and someone took advantage of her, or she was crazy, or she was in love with someone else or she didn’t care about what God thought. Any scenario was bad.

Why would God do this to Joseph? We think about Mary every year and what a special thing it was for her. But what about the man at her side? Is he just window dressing to balance out the manger scene? Is he just there to provide the necessary income to raise the child? It’s like Derek sang this morning – what a strange way to save the world.

Joseph is left to ponder all these questions for a while. There’s a period of darkness between the time he learns of Mary’s pregnancy and the time the angel visits. God sometimes lets us wrestle with our own thoughts before answering our questions.

This was not an easy matter at all. According to Jewish law, if Mary had committed adultery even before she and Joseph were officially married, she could get the death penalty.

**Deuteronomy 22:23-24**

*If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death.*

Mary didn’t do anything, but the baby would be all the proof necessary to enforce the law. Even today, in countries like Iran and Nigeria, death by stoning is still the prescribed punishment for adultery, and quite often it discriminates against women. Why? Because the evidence is there and the men get away without getting caught.

It sounds terribly cruel and harsh to our ears, but that was how seriously that culture viewed infidelity. So when it says Joseph decided to divorce her quietly, we can see that he was actually being very generous and must have really loved Mary.

That was the plan he came up with in his own mind. But I'm not entirely convinced that HE was entirely convinced it was the right thing to do.

Look at the angel's first words to Joseph.

*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.*

Once again, the words "Do not be afraid" are the first thing spoken by the angel. He said "Do not be afraid" to Zechariah, and he said "Do not be afraid" to Mary. Now he says them one more time. And in this case, what Joseph is afraid of is going ahead with the wedding. In other words, that's what he still wants to do – marry this woman. But his fear is making him choose a different plan. What we learn from Joseph's story is that there is a cause for courage.

### **A Cause for courage**

What was he afraid of? I think his biggest concern would how it would look. What would people think of him? Some people will think he fathered the baby. Some will think he should have defended his own honor and called off the marriage to make a point and take the moral high ground.

Joseph's heart was telling him to do one thing, but his fears were telling him something else and clouding his judgment. The angel says, "Don't be afraid. Go ahead and do the unthinkable."

Does fear ever get in your way of doing the right thing? You want to make a decision you know is right, but you wonder if everyone else will think you're crazy? In the church I grew up in, each summer they would put up posters for a teen mission organization that would go to South America and build houses. The headline on the poster was, "Get dirty for God." Sometimes we're afraid of the dirt of ministry, the messiness of getting involved in people's lives.

Like Joseph, we can get pretty good at coming up with a sensible alternative plan, one that will keep us safely away from any danger of getting dirty for God. But God tells us he doesn't want us to be afraid.

### **2 Timothy 1:7-8**

*For the Holy Spirit, God's gift, does not want you to be afraid of people, but to be wise and strong, and to love them and enjoy being with them.*

*If you will stir up this inner power, you will never be afraid to tell others about our Lord or to let them know that I am your friend even though I am here in jail for Christ's sake. You will be ready to suffer with me for the Lord, for he will give you strength in suffering.*

That last line is key. “You will be ready to suffer with me for the Lord, for he will give you strength in suffering.”

The angel didn't tell Joseph, “Don't be afraid – your fears won't come true. People won't think those things.” The angel didn't promise anything like that. All he said was that Mary's story was true – and the baby who would be born would be God himself, right there bringing salvation for the world in spite of all the opinions.

God is telling you “Don't be afraid,” but it isn't because your fears aren't well founded. They very well could all be true. BUT – It's Jesus who is with you. It's Jesus who saves. And like Paul wrote, we don't have to be afraid because the Lord will give us strength in suffering.

So Joseph has permission to overcome his fears and do the unthinkable – take this woman who is pregnant by some other means home to be his wife. As we said, legally, Joseph had the right to seek Mary's punishment, or at the very least, to walk away. Instead, what he's asked to do, what he WANTS to do, is call her his own wife.

And here's where Joseph is essential to the story, because in this one act, he is embodying the essence of the Christmas message. God looked at us, an unfaithful bunch of people who ran every direction except toward him. We broke all his rules. According to the law, we deserved death – permanent spiritual separation from God.

He could have come up with a plan like Joseph – to forgive us but distance himself from us. Look the other way and let us off the hook without pursuing any future relationship with us. That would have been more than generous.

But instead, he calls us his. He wasn't afraid to make the church his bride.

### **Isaiah 54:5-6**

*For your Maker is your husband--  
the LORD Almighty is his name--  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;  
he is called the God of all the earth.  
The LORD will call you back  
as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit.”*

We need Joseph – not just to show us how to have courage, but to show us God the Father and the extent of his love for us.

### **The source of love**

Even those who would never believe Mary's story would be forced to admire the incredible compassion of the man who would choose to love her instead of passing judgment on her. Look again at this one paragraph from Matthew:

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."*

Jesus was literally "God with us", but Matthew seems to include everything that took place, all the events leading up to his birth, as being evidence that God is with us. Joseph stood by Mary's side when she needed him most. Rather than abandon her and let her deal with her problems on her own, he chose to say, "This is my wife. This is the woman that I want to be with, and I will take on whatever grief or hardship or responsibility comes with that choice for the joy of being with her. I'm not leaving."

God has not abandoned you. He has chosen you and me and says, "These are the people I want to be with, and I will take on whatever grief or hardship or responsibility comes with that. I'm not leaving."

There's a verse later in the New Testament that I love that summarizes what Joseph shows us about God's love.

### **James 2:13**

*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

That verse tells me that God's love outlasts his anger, just like Joseph's love for Mary outlasted his anger over the situation. Mercy triumphs over judgment. And guess what? The author who wrote that verse of the Bible was James – James the brother of Jesus and son of Mary and Joseph. He grew up in a household where he had seen that truth firsthand, and he must have thanked his father for not giving in to his fears, because James wouldn't have been born if Joseph had walked away. Perhaps more than most people, James understood the power of love that endures and overcomes.

The psalmist wrote this about God:

### **Psalm 103:10-12**

*He does not treat us as our sins deserve  
or repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

Joseph gave us a great picture of God not treating us as we deserved. He showed us the cause for courage and the source of love, and he also demonstrated one more thing: the reality of our future.

### **The Reality of our Future**

When the angel talked to Joseph, it wasn't just to tell him he should go ahead and get married. He also was to adopt Jesus and raise him as his own. The angel gave Joseph the same instruction that had been given to Mary – to name the baby Jesus.

In first century Palestine, the naming process was significant, and for Joseph to be involved in giving Jesus his name would be equivalent to saying "I'm going to be this boy's father."

Hold that thought for a minute. There's something else we know about Joseph that must have been important to the angel, because it showed up in the way he addressed Joseph.

*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.*

Joseph was identified as a son of David, the ancient king of Israel. That means Joseph was part of the royal family. If and when Israel ever regained sovereignty, he would have been an eligible candidate to consider for king, because he was in the blood line.

I just read this week that the King of Jordan has recently changed his legal heir from being his brother to being his son. The article talked about the significance of that change and what it would mean for the future of the country. It will also make a huge difference for that boy, when someday he will be asked to take the throne. His life will never be the same, because he is now not just a prince, but a crown prince, with an incredible inheritance waiting for him.

Matthew doesn't miss the importance of Joseph's lineage. In fact, when Matthew gives a genealogy for Jesus, he doesn't trace Mary's family tree – he traces Joseph's. It's a long list of names, but it ends this way:

#### **Matthew 1:15-16**

*...and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.*

Why would Matthew do that? Why would he go with Joseph's ancestry instead of Mary's. There's one simple reason: It was by being adopted by Joseph that Jesus had a legal claim to the throne of David. And it was important that God's Messiah was part of the house of David. Isaiah had predicted it centuries earlier.

#### **Isaiah 9:7**

*He will reign on David's throne*

*and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.*

Why go to all the work of having Joseph adopt Jesus to give him the legal right to that inheritance? There's only one reason I can think of, and that is to give us one more picture of what was going on when God sent Jesus.

### **Ephesians 1:5-6**

*Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) 6 He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.*

We're not naturally in God's family, but he has adopted us. He has taken us on as his own, and in doing so, he's named us all as his legal heirs.

### **Ephesians 3:6**

*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

It was important for Jesus to be adopted because that's what we are. It was Joseph's lineage that he borrowed and took as his own, Just like it is God's holiness and character and life we take as our own. We wouldn't have any right to any of it except for the fact that he willingly chooses to give it to us.

Joseph is much more than just the silent, stand in father figure in the life of Jesus. He gives us so much to think about and realize about our Father in heaven. As we close today, I'd like you to think about what we've heard this morning and how it relates to you personally.

Are you facing any fears right now? Are you holding back from doing the right thing for fear of how it will look, how people will react or what they will think? God says, "Don't be afraid. This is of the Holy Spirit."

Think about Mary having to break the news to Joseph, wondering what he would do. Is there a burden you're needing to talk to God about? Are you worried he'll desert you when he knows who you are? He will not abandon you. This is the God who said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." You can know he will stand by your side because he has chosen you.

Finally, have you been adopted? Being in God's family isn't about what you deserve – it's about who God is. He can give you all the rights of a full-fledged heir. You can know that your future is real. If you've never arrived at a point where you told God you want to be in his family, you can do that this morning.

