

**THE WORD** Matthew 1:18-25 Common English Bible

This 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.

**Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As 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. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."**

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel, God with us.

**When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife... She gave birth to a son and Joseph called him Jesus.**

**Living the Word**                      *"What's Love Got To Do With It?"*

I work months ahead on the sermon themes for worship. Two weeks ago I finished titles through next May. When the time comes to put the sermon together, the title doesn't always seem to fit and needs to be changed. My original sermon title for this sermon was 'Love of a Man for a Woman.' As I began on this sermon, that didn't seem as appropriate, so last week I retitled it as 'Joseph's Story.'

Even so, there is nothing more intriguing than a catchy title that makes you wonder what I am up to... The title of today's sermon is *What's Love Got To Do With It?* I went looking for a picture of Tina Turner to shock you. Tina Turner is indeed a shocker and we aren't focusing on her this morning, but the concept is the same.

Love is so multi-faceted. Because the whole Bible and all that Christ came for is based on God's love for us and our love for each other, it is a very valid question. Another question along the same lines could be "Where is the Love?" That could include pictures of Roberta Flack...but it won't.

Instead today we are looking at the pictures of a man who becomes a father, not by his own doing, but by God's will and way, and the love he had for the Son he will share with God, the Father. You remember Zechariah's story from 2 weeks ago? He was an old man, and he loved God, but his faith had been tempered by waiting for a child of his own. In his life as in the temple, he was just going through the motions of duty.

We know that the teenager, Mary, loved God, and trusted enough to live in the moment. But for Joseph...he also loved God, but he had made a plan. He would marry at the appropriate age. He planned to provide a home and a life for his family. He was fulfilling the expectation of the community. Then suddenly it was all turned upside down. The girl he was engaged or betrothed to is pregnant???. He knows that he is not the father... Feelings of denial, anger and betrayal flood through his mind and his body.

Betrothal was considered the same as being married. The marriage was completed when the wife moved from her father's house into her husband's. She was to remain pure until that time. Infidelity counted as adultery, a woman could be stoned to death for adultery. Joseph was a righteous man, he needed to divorce her for being unfaithful. The Hebrew law was clear and didn't allow him to forgive or forget. Yet he wanted there to be no spectacle about it, so he planned to divorce her quietly.

Each year I like to begin the Advent season by watching the movie, *The Nativity Story*. So often our whole concept of Christmas is based around a crèche scene set up in the sanctuary of a church. We imagine the story, but have a hard time mentally viewing a setting that is so far removed from our lives today.

I have shown the movie to every Confirmation Class since it came out to expand their understanding. I have several copies and Christmas goes for another 12 days after today, so it is not too late to watch it if you want to borrow a copy.

This film has been greatly lauded for its attention to details of that time period and its Biblical accuracy, though of course we don't know all of the details. In the movie, there are two scenes that put us at the moments of Joseph's story. In the first clip, Mary's parents and Joseph have recently found out about her pregnancy and confront her.

Her parents are questioning her as to how this has happened. Mary is very serene as she tries to explain to them that she knows that this is 'of God.' Joseph is standing a bit away, but when her father asks her about what she has done to Joseph, she has no answer and Joseph asks to speak.

He then explains that he chose her as his wife because "I have lived my life seeking honor. How am I to answer this? If I claim this child is mine, I would be lying. I would then be breaking a law laid down by God. If I say this child is not mine they will ask me what I want to do?" Mary responded with these words: "There is a will for this child greater than my fear of what they may do."

The second clip is of Joseph's dream and visit by the angel. The angel says to him: "Fear not, that which is conceived in me is 'of God.' And they shall call his name Jesus." Joseph then goes to Mary and says: "Mary, God has shown me. I believe you. The child will need a father."

Zechariah and Joseph really have small parts in the whole book. Zechariah's story is only told in the Gospel of Luke, yet it is a powerful story about fatherhood coming when least expected and trusting enough to win back favor in the miracle of John's birth and naming. Then Zechariah praises God with a prophetic poem. For Zechariah a total of 12 verses.

The bloodline in Joseph's time was of major importance as it was the only way to know who you were and where you came from. Today it is a hobby to follow your ancestry back to know where you came from. I began this 25 years ago, with my mother when searching my own bloodline. My father is third generation from Sweden and my mother adopted that heritage in her cooking and celebrating through learning the recipes to Swedish pancakes, Swedish meatballs and decorating the house in Swedish blue.

Mom always told us she was 'American' because she didn't have a story to tell, a bloodline to follow. Twenty-five years ago we did the work by sending letters, some computer searching and recording it all on a very long roll of freezer paper. We found that her family came to America from England in the late 1600s, not long after the Mayflower. The ship they traveled on was captained by her seventh grandfather, Peter Collamore.

Through the years I have dabbled a bit with this genealogy work, and have taken it off of the freezer paper and have it now in a computer file. For me this is heritage and history, but does not change who I am or how I am treated as a person in this lifetime, beyond the fact that all of my people brought me to the place I was born and what kind of community and family environment I was raised in.

When we talk of immigrants, a dividing wall, and where we 'belong.' We have to remember that only by the movement of our ancestors and the grace of God were we born in any given place. Babies born under government oppression need parents to help them survive, just as people born on 'this side of the wall.'

Back to Joseph, who is written into three of the four Gospels (The book of Mark doesn't tell the birth narrative). Besides the actual birth story, in several places it says "People called Jesus, son of Joseph." When

Caesar proclaimed the census to be taken, all had to go to the home of their ancestors to register. Joseph had to go 90 miles to Bethlehem to the House of David. Matthew also lists the lineage of Joseph all of the way back to Adam(Matthew 1:1-17). Included are some notable characters you might have heard of: the prophet Amos, King David, Father Abraham, Noah and Adam.

The Angel addressed Joseph, as the son of David, acknowledging the Bloodline and giving him the name of the baby to be born, Jesus. As the one to name the baby, Joseph was acknowledging Jesus as his son and part of the line all of the way back to Adam. It is also important for us to remember that Joseph was a Carpenter, a craftsman of his time, talented and skilled, but of no great importance other than one of the community.

When Jesus was age 12, and spoke for the first time in the Temple, with the men from his own community, people seemed confused by his assurance and wisdom. They said: 'Is this not Joseph's son?' Or "Is this not the carpenter's son?" This is the last recorded mention of Joseph in the Gospels. But he was a man who loved God enough to risk fathering the Son of God.

When you become a parent, there is no real instruction book. There are many moments of apprehension and worry over 'doing it right.' When I remember some of the challenges I gave my parents...I was the oldest of five children, the first to come through my set of parents. I vividly recall two incidents my father had to deal with.

The first was in my late teens, three months after I had gotten my driver's license. I was coming home from my job as an aide at the assisted living facility when I hit the first ice of the season and ran the car into a narrow bridge. I walked to a house and they called my dad.

I was unhurt, but pretty shook up, also afraid of what dad would say about the whole thing. When he arrived he just said "The car can be fixed, are you OK?" I can only imagine how many things went through his mind as he drove from home the 4 ½ miles to the accident site. Yet the grace with which he loved me came through in those few short words.

The second time I recall so clearly, happened in my young adult years. I had just had a final fight with my long-term boyfriend. I don't remember the fight, but I do remember deciding in my anger that I was walking home the 6 miles. It was around midnight, but it was summer.

My now-x-boyfriend followed me through town and when he realized I was determined to do this, he stopped at a phone booth and called my dad to come and get me. I had walked well into the second mile before my dad pulled up to drive me home. He never said a word, for the 4 plus miles home, he didn't even ask a question. He was just 'there' for me in the middle of the night. There are so many more times my dad showed his love for me. You can ask my sister, Gwen – she has said for years that I as the eldest, and full of mischief, and paved the way for my siblings.

Zechariah, considered an 'old' man, had life experience, but not about fathering, still for years he anxiously awaited a son. He waited so long that his belief in the possibility had died. Mary had youthful response to the possibilities ahead of her and she never hesitated, though she was in for a bumpy ride. Joseph was a young adult, still planning his perfect life. What kind of speculations must Joseph had about fathering Jesus, once he believed it was happening?

Matthew has written for us in verse 18: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place." 'Jesus Christ' meaning Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the one in which our people have been waiting for hundreds of years, Jesus the Savior. Mary and Joseph had to grow into that understanding of Jesus.

We all, too soon learn that there is no perfect life. Everything can change in a moment. Life is filled with mystery and wonder. We have to be ready for anything! When Mary and Joseph meet a shepherd on the way to Bethlehem, in the movie, the shepherd tells Mary: "We are all given a gift to share."

Joseph's gift is found in his love for God and for Mary by carrying through this strange life situation. Joseph's gift is shared in his love for God and God's Son, Jesus as he raises him as his own until a time that Jesus is ready to begin to live into his gifts to share.

Many fathers in many lifetimes have been given a gift in the form of a child that didn't come by way of the ideal scenario. Yet they are also given the opportunity to be a part of making a better way for their child that what they might have experienced. Joseph taught Jesus carpentry, not knowing that his son's future would include. He followed the example of the fathers around him, giving Jesus a 'normal life' for that time and place.

There must have been many times, including that day when Jesus was 12 and spoke in the temple, that Joseph had glimpses of Jesus potential and wondered what would be next. Scholars believe that Joseph died between that event and the beginning of Jesus' ministry at age 30. Though he spoke in the movie version, he never had any lines in the book – the Bible.

It may seem like a 'bit part' in the whole story of God, but it can be a powerful witness to us as to the way we respond to changes in our life plans and sometimes, how God sends an angel – often with skin on, so we don't freak out, to help us see God's plan for us. We all have a part to play, one day we may become a parent, mentor or grandparent when we didn't expect it. Our lives will change as will our opportunities to guide the next generation. One day we may need an angel, another day, God may send us to someone else as a prophetic angel.

Can you believe this stuff?? Only by faith, not by understanding? That is what love has got to do with it.