

Choose to Love

Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-25

I've got a question for all of us ... have you tried to find quiet times of expectation, of preparation for Jesus? Have you put Jesus before cookies and parties and presents? Have you found time for meditation and prayer over the last few weeks?

If you can say "Yes, I've tried, I've even succeeded a bit" – then I'm sure you can also say that the Spirit of Christmas is strong within you! If the answer is ... "I just haven't been able to find the time," then at least take this afternoon, give yourself ONE hour of quiet, of calm. Think on what we are about to celebrate. It's not the tree, or the food, or even the music.

We're about to celebrate the birth of our Savior. We're about to celebrate the greatest Gift of Love that we could ever receive. God has given us the miracle, the free gift, of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ!

For unto US a child is born, unto US a son is given ... Unto US is born our Savior!

Love ... the final theme of Advent. It's one of the most powerful forces in the world. Love – it can be life-changing and, once again, it's a choice, it's an action – just like peace, hope and joy.

Love comes in all shapes and sizes. We love pizza and chocolate, sunshine and beaches. Some of us love our jobs. Some of us even love snow skiing and ice fishing.

We love our friends, our families in one way - and we love our spouses in another.

We love God and God loves us ... God, in fact, is love and His love is never-ending.

John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* God's love for us is so great that He sent a part of Himself, He sent His Son to us, so that, through Jesus' sacrifice and our decision to believe in and follow Him, we can receive an eternity in God's presence.

Turning to today's Christmas story in Matthew, we see that it is written from Joseph's perspective.

Mary, just a teenager, is engaged to Joseph, but not yet married as we understand marriage, although their engagement was as legally binding as marriage is today. Back then your parents found your spouse; you were betrothed – engaged – before a group of witnesses; you waited one year before getting married; and during that time, the only way to change your mind and not get married would be to get divorced.

So, Mary is engaged to Joseph and she is found to be pregnant. Today, we are rarely shocked when a young girl is pregnant and unmarried. It's become so common. But during those times, Mary could have been stoned to death if the community thought she had committed adultery, or at the very least she would have been publicly disgraced.

There is no doubt that Joseph is surprised. He has a choice. Joseph can go ahead and marry her, ignoring the fact that he's not the father. At this point, he doesn't know that it's the Holy Spirit. He could choose to make it a public matter. Mary will be disgraced and possibly killed – and this would probably be expected by their community.

Or Joseph can ignore the law and give Mary a second chance at life. Joseph, being a righteous man, had decided to dismiss her quietly – to divorce her, so that no one would know Mary's disgrace - that Joseph was not this Child's father.

But an angel appeared to Joseph and told Joseph not to worry. The passage says, *"But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'"*

Jesus, this unexpected Child, is a gift of love from God to the world! Don't be afraid Joseph, even though the community may call you a fool; don't be afraid even though you think Mary has been unfaithful; don't be afraid because the Holy Spirit is present in all of this!

Matthew reminds us that this was all predicted by the prophet Isaiah ... *"Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"*

God is with us no matter what. God is with us when everything seems to be going beautifully. God is with us when we lose our job, when our children give us all kinds of grief, when the doctors give us test results that terrify us, when we feel alone and abandoned. God, who is Love, is with us always. His love surrounds us and comforts us, protects us and frees us from fear.

I can't even begin to imagine how Joseph was feeling! He is to be the stepfather of the Son of God. What an enormous responsibility. And before the child is born, they must travel to Bethlehem for the census. He had to have been terrified. He must care for his wife, Mary; but more importantly, he must care for the unborn child of GOD!

All of us parents have birthing stories to tell. When my son, Tyler, was born, we knew that I was to have a cesarean section ... he would be my third C section so it wasn't too upsetting for me.

But Toby! This was his first child. This was his wife that would be cut open.

Toby was at work, on a 12 hour night shift, when I went into labor (which I wasn't supposed to have done!) He rushed home, drove up on the front lawn and helped me to the car.

We brought the girls to my parents and rushed to the hospital. The nurses immediately took me away for delivery. Toby says that he thought he was saying goodbye to me for the last time. He was in the waiting room, alone, scared for his wife and unborn child.

So imagine Joseph, scared for his wife and their unborn child. Alone, in an unfamiliar town. Unable to find a safe place to rest. Knowing that his Child, the Son of God, was to be born this very day.

Like Joseph, we can trust the heart of God, even when we don't fully understand the how and why of what He does and is. We can trust the heart of God when things aren't going our way, when it seems like the world is against us. We can trust the heart of God when He asks us to do something that doesn't make sense to us.

God doesn't want us to be puppets on strings. He doesn't create us to follow His every rule blindly, as if we aren't able to do anything else - because that isn't love; that's legalism, it's a learned behavior.

God gives us free-will to love Him, to seek Him, to follow Him, to obey Him, to trust Him ... because we choose to do these things. He wants us to have a heart-change that makes us want to love Him, seek Him, trust Him. He's looking for us to choose to kneel before Him because we love Him that much, because we understand and accept all that He has done for us. God wants us to love Him, to desire a relationship with Him to such a level that we humble ourselves and fall at His feet.

But back to scripture, *"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus."* No marital relations with her - no one would be able to say that Joseph was the father of a premature child. And Joseph, being the earthly father of Jesus, named his Son.

God entrusted His Child to Mary and Joseph, two faith-filled and righteous people that chose to be married. How could they have known that they would be chosen to raise our Savior Jesus Christ? How could they have known that God was at work in their lives? But an angel told them what God would do.

God trusted that Joseph would not turn Mary away, that he would become a good father, that Joseph would choose to lovingly raise this Child as his own.

God calls on each of us to do things we don't expect, that we haven't planned, that we might not even want. God works in our lives in ways that we don't expect. So we ask, "What is God doing in my life right now? Where do I see God at work? What am I being called to do? What is coming my way?"

We have a choice and we should prayerfully and joyfully choose, like Joseph, to say “Yes” to God; to choose to not turn away God’s own Son – whether He arrives through a friend, through a beggar, through a lost child, through someone who is hungry, who is lonely, who can’t find the joy this season ... no matter how Jesus appears to you, courageously accept Him.

God loves us so much that He gives us a choice to love Him back! He sent this amazing part of Himself to us to free us from our sins; so that we could know His love even more.

Joseph didn’t expect Jesus’ arrival. There are moments when God, when Jesus, when the Holy Spirit appear unexpectedly in our lives – those joy moments I like to record. God appears in our lives, surprises us and reminds us just how much we are loved. Those who lived during the time of Jesus’ life were in the concrete presence of Love with a capital L!

We are called to love God back with all we have. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to share God’s love with the world so everyone can come to know Jesus, to love Jesus, to be in God’s presence for all eternity. That is how much God loves us!

We have a few more days of Advent before Christmas morning. I want you to accept the gift from God of love – the love that Joseph had for Mary and for Jesus; accept the gift from God that is the ability to wait patiently in God’s presence. I challenge you to see and experience Christmas differently than the world does.

We can be assured that God is with us, always, we are not alone and we are loved.