

The Angels of Christmas - The Angel's Message to Joseph

This month we are looking at the good news that was given by the angels throughout the Christmas story. Zechariah heard the good news that God had heard the prayers of His people and was going to send the Messiah. Zechariah also got the good news that he and his wife were finally going to have a child who would be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah. Mary heard the good news that she had been favored by God and chosen to be the one who would give birth to the Messiah. All this good news, however, was not good news for Joseph.

Joseph was a righteous man who spent his entire life honoring God. In all of his ways, Joseph sought to be obedient to the teaching of God's law. When Mary told him that she was pregnant, and he knew that he was not the father, what the law told Joseph to do was to dismiss her. An engagement was legally binding, so for Mary to now show up pregnant meant that Joseph should divorce her, and if he wanted to protect his own righteous image, Joseph should do it in a very public way so everyone would know that he was not at fault. But because Joseph loved Mary and didn't want to shame her, he made up his mind to dismiss her quietly. He would work through the mess she had handed him and move on with his life.

We have to assume that Mary tried to explain to Joseph that she had been visited by an angel and that it was the power of God that brought about this child, but clearly Joseph wasn't buying it. Nothing like this had ever happened before, and things like this just didn't happen in his life. While we might want to be critical of Joseph for not being more supportive of Mary, we have to give him some credit for loving her enough to not publicly shame her.

For Joseph, the decision was made. He was going to move on, and God could have let that happen. God could have let Joseph walk away and then bring someone else into Mary's life and allow another man to be part of God's plan of salvation. Nothing is impossible for God. God could have said, *fine Joseph, you don't believe what I am doing? Then just go your way and I'll go my way.* But that is not what God said and that's not what God did.

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What God did was to send one more angel to give Joseph this message. ***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.***
Matthew 1:20-21.

God loved Joseph enough to speak to him during a time of doubt and disappointment. When Joseph's world was crashing down around him, God told him to keep going because God was with Him. I love this! Maybe of all the angel's messages during the Christmas story this is my favorite because I love that God didn't dismiss Joseph but sent an angel to tell him that he was loved, and that God had a plan for his life, and that God was with him. I love this message because it means that when we have doubts, when we are ready to walk away from God and dismiss Him from our lives, God doesn't dismiss us. God loves us enough to never dismiss us and walk away.

I love this because there was a time in my life when I was ready to walk away from God. I didn't want to follow God's will or consider God's plan, and I didn't want to give up the things that I wanted in life, so I dismissed God. I told God to leave me alone. But God didn't. While God gave me a glimpse of what life would be like without Him, and everything in my life went from bad to worse, God never left me. God loved me enough to stay by my side as I wrestled and wandered.

God loved me enough that when I then sat down on a concrete bench under Beaumont Tower on the campus of Michigan State University, God said, *Andy, with me there is life, without me there is death, and the choice is yours.* That was the message that came to me after I had dismissed God from my life a month earlier. I told God I wasn't interested in following Him and I would live life on my own. But God loved me enough that He didn't let go of me and He didn't dismiss me. God kept loving me and walking with me and God spoke about how I could experience all the fullness of life.

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One of the common themes we have seen in all of the angels' messages is that God loves His people. God loved Israel enough to listen to their prayers and fulfill the promise of giving them a Messiah. God loved Zechariah enough to fulfill his longing for a son. God loved Mary enough to choose her to be the mother of the Messiah and to do a miracle in her life, and God loved Joseph enough to not let him walk away in his doubt and disappointment. God could have let him go, but God didn't. One more time God sent an angel to let someone know that they were loved and chosen by God and that God was with them.

The angel reminded Joseph of what the prophet said long ago.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us"). Matthew 1:23

It is in those moments when we are filled with doubt and disappointment, and in those moments when we ask ourselves if God is even there, that God longs to tell us that He is. In dreams, through His word, in moments of silence, through the words of others, God speaks to us and the message He shares is the same one He gave to Joseph. *Don't be afraid to keep going. I am with you. Don't be afraid to keep planning and dreaming and living life. I am with you. Don't be afraid of the dark or doubt or disappointments you are facing. I am with you.*

Covid brought disappointment into the Christmas season a few years ago but we found that even during that difficult time, God was with us. This year, many people are facing the doubts and disappointments of life brought on by a difficult economy. Investments have decreased. Prices have increased, and the jobs we have now can be challenging but trying to find a new or right or better job can be even worse. The plans we had for our future are not as clear today as they were yesterday and it's easy to dismiss God or start walking on our own. It is precisely in these moments that God wants to tell us that He is still with us.

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In Luke's gospel, the angel appeared to Zechariah and Mary in ways they could see and talk to them, but here, the angel appears in a dream. Angels speaking to people in dreams is not uncommon in Jewish tradition. God spoke to Abraham, Jacob and Solomon in dreams, so when God spoke to Joseph, it put him in good company. I wonder, however, if God had to speak to Joseph in a dream because when he was awake, Joseph was too busy trying to think through the problem and figure out how to solve it on his own. Had Joseph given God time and space to speak? Do we give God enough time and space to speak? Are we ever still long enough to know that God is with us and that God has something to say to us?

I know this is a difficult season to be still and quiet. Good and important activities are all around us. Opportunities to serve and worship and share and give are all around us and we want to take part in it all. And there is so much great music to listen to, scriptures to read, movies to watch (and not just on hallmark), and so our days and nights and weekends are filled. Filled with noise. Filled with activity and movement. We fill our lives with so many good things that it can be hard for us to hear God speaking.

Now let me be clear that the answer isn't always to do less. God can speak to us through our times of worship, service, sharing, and giving. And the answer isn't to turn off all music and movies. The answer is to ask God to speak to us in ways we can hear Him in the midst of our busy-ness. God can speak during times of worship. Through the music and message of the Christmas Concert this afternoon, God can speak. In fact, we might just hear an angel's message to us if we come with ears to hear. We can hear God in all that we do if we ask God to speak and then work to listen.

God loved Joseph enough to speak to him. Through his doubts, his disillusionment, and all his thinking and planning about what he should do, God loved Joseph enough to find a time to speak. And Joseph didn't just listen to what God said, he followed it. Joseph took Mary home to be his wife. He gave the child she carried the name Jesus, and he helped raise the son of God.

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When Joseph made this decision, he chose to live not by the letter of God's law but the spirit of God's law. Joseph didn't dismiss or divorce Mary, which is what the letter of God's law required, instead he lived by the spirit of God's law, which was to love. We know that love is the foundation and spirit in all of God's law because of the two passages that the Jewish people revered and Jesus lifted up.

Deuteronomy 6:5. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*

Leviticus 19:18. *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

Joseph's decision to love God and love Mary shows us what it looks like to follow the spirit of God's law, and it was an example that Jesus followed throughout His life. One of the things that Jesus was criticized for over and over again was breaking the letter of God's law. Jesus worked on the Sabbath, He healed on the Sabbath. Jesus touched people who were unclean and allowed unclean and sinful people to touch Him. Jesus spoke to Gentiles and women, and allowed children into His presence so He could bless them. Jesus taught people not to hate their enemy but to love them, and instead of seeking an eye for an eye, He said it was better to turn the other cheek.

Jesus didn't live by the letter of God's law but taught us all to live by the spirit of God's love that rests behind the law. It's not that we ignore the law, it's that we look deeper than the law to see and hear God's wisdom and discern God's will. This is what Jesus did. Where did Jesus learn to do this? From His heavenly father. Where did Jesus see this lived out? In His earthly father, Joseph. When the law said to dismiss Mary, Joseph took her into his home and heart and loved her.

Joseph loved God enough to do what God asked him to do, and he loved Mary enough to take her into his home. Joseph traveled with

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Mary to Bethlehem and cared for her and their newborn son in a stable. Joseph protected Mary and their child when they were warned to get out of Israel. Joseph protected Mary on a trip to Egypt and then a trip home to Nazareth years later. Joseph loved Mary, not with words, but with actions.

In case you haven't noticed, Joseph is the only character in our nativity scenes who doesn't speak. The angels speak. Mary speaks and says *Yes* to God. The shepherds speak when they say, *let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the angel told us*. The wisemen speak when they ask for directions on where to find the king of Israel. And unless you believe the legend that the animals spoke on the first Christmas, we know they didn't speak, but they did make noise. But Joseph was silent. There is not one recorded word of Joseph in the Bible and yet his example of love was powerful enough to shape the life of Jesus. Joseph shows us that:

Love is not measured by what we say, but by what we do.

This is not to say that our words of love are not important. It is very important for us to say, *I love you*, to those we love. Those words can be transformative. This past week we celebrated the life of Jane Holderman and one of the most touching stories I heard about Jane was how her constant words of, *I love you*, shared with her grandson with autism, broke through to him. Jane was one of the only people who could touch her grandson without him getting agitated. Her constant words brought him comfort and in time her words allowed him to find his own words and say, *I love you*, in return. Words are important, but those words have to be backed up with actions.

1 John 3:16-18. *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

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God put His love into action when He sent Jesus into this world to be our Savior. Jesus put His love into action when He saved us from sin by taking up the cross. Joseph put his love into action when he chose not to dismiss Mary but chose to live by the spirit of love and take her home to be his wife.

It's not enough for us to say that we love God, or that we love others, we need to put that love into action. I want to invite you over the next 2 weeks as we prepare to celebrate the gift of God's love in Jesus, to find one way that you can put your love for God into action. Maybe it's to be fully present in worship. That means showing up and setting aside everything else that is going on so you can be still and know that God is with you. Maybe it's to read the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke, and then give God time to tell you what it's all about. Find one intentional way that you can love God as we get ready for Christmas.

Then find one way you can put your love for someone else into action. Serve others at the Christmas Dinner. Love our brothers and sisters in Ukraine by giving to the Christmas Offering. Take in a friend or neighbor who might be alone for the holidays. Bake something to give away. Reach out to help someone who is going through a difficult time. Find one way to put your love into action before Christmas.

God's message to Joseph was, I love you. I'm not going to dismiss you and walk away. I'm going to be with you and show you what love looks like. Joseph learned what love was all about and then set an example of love that Jesus followed. God still loves us and God invites us to love Him and others in ways that will not only change the lives of others but change us as well.

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Next Steps

The Message of the Angel to Joseph

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Why did Joseph not dismiss Mary when the law told him to?
Why did God not dismiss Joseph?

When have you wanted to dismiss God and walk away from His word, purpose, and plan? What did you do?

In the busyness of these next two weeks, ask God to speak to you. Listen for God in His word, the music you will hear, the movies you will watch, and the schedule that you keep.

Instead of living out the letter of law, Joseph lived out the spirit of the law and chose to love. Consider these times when Jesus also lived by the spirit of the law:

- **Mark 3:1-6**
- **Luke 13:10-17**
- **Luke 6:1-5**
- **Luke 18:16**
- **John 4:1-26**

What is one intentional way you can love God during these next two weeks?

What is one intentional way you can love others during these next two weeks?

Put your love into action. *"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."* 1 John 3:18