

Beginning in 2010, a show titled Who Do You Think You Are? featured a different celebrity each week as they tracked down information about their ancestors. The children of Bethlehem in the 1st century BC didn't need to do a genealogy search to know who they were however. Every child in Bethlehem from the 10th century BC onward knew they lived in the "*city of David*," with many knowing they were a "*son of David*," a descendant of that royal ancestor.

What's more, they all also knew the prophecies of how one day God would raise up a "*son of David*" to the throne, as Micah had written "*you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel*," and that Isaiah had written that this "*son of David*" would "*reign . . . forever*."

One of the children of Bethlehem in the 1st century BC was named Joseph. While Bethlehem was a working class town where most people were bakers who provided bread for the people of Jerusalem or shepherds who provided sacrificial lambs for the Jerusalem temple, Joseph (like his father) became a carpenter. Carpenters in the ancient world crafted all sorts of artistic creations.

In such a profession, Joseph (and his father) would have been a little higher up the economic scale than most other Bethlehem residents. And befitting that place in the social strata, Joseph's father (whom Matthew tells us was named Jacob) would have sought to arrange his son's marriage to someone of equal status. But Jacob must have come up empty in that search in Bethlehem because he went all the way to Nazareth to find an appropriate bride: someone from a righteous family, someone of the tribe of Judah, someone who was also a descendant of David.

When Jacob got together with that girl's father (who according to Luke was named Heli) they would have agreed on the marriage and a betrothal period of a year. According to the customs of the day, THE PLAN would have been that at the end of the betrothal period, Joseph and Mary would be married in Nazareth (her home town). After the wedding, they would move to an extra room Joseph would have built onto Jacob's home in Bethlehem (his home town), and they would have lived there until Joseph built his own home. But as Robert Burns would later write "*the best laid plans of mice and men sometimes go awry*." And awry they went.

We see this in today's reading. There we are told that "*Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit*."

But that statements is what the Church came to believe AFTER THE FACT. At the time that event occurred, however, Joseph had a very different interpretation of what was happening. We see this when we read that in response to Mary being "*found to be with child*," Joseph decided to "*to divorce her quietly*." Joseph obviously didn't believe she had become pregnant "*through the Holy Spirit*," but instead assumed she had been unfaithful, and wanted nothing to do with her.

To see what that tells us about the journey from Bethlehem to Christmas Joseph had to make, as well as the journey from Bethlehem to Christmas we today are called to make, we need to look at today's passage from Matthew carefully. The reason is that when Matthew wrote about Joseph's journey from his life in Bethlehem to the experience we call Christmas, he was not just speaking of a physical place but also a LIFE EXPERIENCE, a time when God broke through the ordinary (and

sometimes difficult) occurrences of life to do something extraordinary (and bring about joy in the midst of the darkness). We see this when we delve into the details of what Matthew tells us. For when we delve into the details, we see several important things.

First, as I already noted, we see that Matthew tells us “*Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child.*” That seems to be a fairly straightforward statement. But there is more to the story than just the fact that Mary’s pregnancy was noticed. We see this when we ponder the fact that Matthew doesn’t tell us WHO “*found*” Mary “*to be with child,*” or HOW they found out. It could have been Mary’s father or mother. It could have been the local rabbi. It could have been any one of a dozen busybodies in Nazareth. But in all likelihood it was none of those people. If it were, the news of that discovery would not have made it to Joseph in Bethlehem. There were no phones at the time. Telegraphs were a long way off. And even the grapevine wouldn’t have connected Nazareth to Bethlehem. Instead, the most likely way Mary “*was found to be with child*” was that Joseph himself discovered it.

If you recall the passages we heard the last two weeks, we were told that the angel Gabriel told Mary that “*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,*” and in response to that shocking announcement (along with the news that Elizabeth was pregnant) Mary “*hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea*” to see Elizabeth. But Mary would not have made that trip alone. Few people in the ancient world, let alone a teenage girl, would set out on a 9 day journey alone. So Mary probably joined others headed south from Nazareth, with some going to Jerusalem, some further south to Judea (like Mary), and some to Bethlehem. And one of those who went to Bethlehem probably delivered a message to her fiancé to come visit her at her cousin Elizabeth’s home.

After all, Mary and Joseph may have met for the very first time when Jacob and Heli sat down to arrange their marriage. And their conversation in that first visit would have been brief, and probably overseen by her mother for the sake of propriety. But once the angel arrived, things changed. And Mary in her distress probably wanted to not only talk to Elizabeth (in whose life God was also apparently doing something miraculous), but also Joseph - to whom she was soon to be married. But that conversation probably didn’t go as she planned. Joseph probably noticed immediately that she was “*with child.*” And Joseph probably didn’t buy her story about the Holy Spirit making her pregnant. So Joseph probably stormed back home in a huff, angry, upset, and deciding that he was not going to go through with the wedding.

The second thing we see is that while Joseph was probably angry, and did not believe what Mary had told him about how it was that she had come to be “*with child,*” he was still the “*son of David*” he had been raised to be by Jacob. What that meant, according to Matthew, was that he was “*a righteous man.*” And because he was a righteous man, he “*did not want to expose her to public disgrace.*” So by the time he walked the two hours from Elizabeth’s home in Judea back to Bethlehem, he had decided to “*divorce her quietly.*” To see why that was important, we need to ponder what it meant for a Jewish person to be “*righteous*” in the 1st century AD.

Throughout the Old Testament, there was a debate about what God meant when He called people to be righteous. In some passages, it seems that people thought being righteous meant merely obeying what God said His people should do, and not doing the things God said they shouldn't do. But in other passages, we see the idea that righteousness also involved the internal condition of the heart, feeling compassion, and showing mercy. We see this in the words of the prophet Micah, for instance, who asked "*what does the Lord require of you?*" and then answered by writing "*act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*"

Turning back to Joseph, we see that HIS thoughts on that issue seems to have been that righteousness involved compassion, mercy, and love being engendered in people and not just following a list of rules. And we see this in the fact that the Law of Moses stipulated that a woman caught in the act of adultery, which is what Mary would have been accused of if Joseph made her pregnancy "*public,*" should be stoned to death. So, if Joseph were merely a follow the 'letter of the law' kind of guy in terms of righteousness, he would have just publicly announced that he was divorcing Mary because she was "*with child*" and let the religious authorities investigate. But that is not what he did. Joseph decided to "*divorce her quietly*" and not "*expose her to public disgrace.*"

But getting to that place must not have been easy for Joseph. He had spent three months building an extra room on Jacob's house for them to live in after their wedding. He had spent three months crafting furnishings for that room. And he had spent three months laying out his "*best laid plans*" for their marriage. Now, that was out the window. Except it wasn't. Because "*an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,*" and told him Mary was being truthful.

Which brings us to the last thing we see in this passage: Joseph chose to do "*what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.*" Which would have taken a great deal of faith! A virgin birth had never happened before. And with no one else, especially the gossips of the town, having had an angel speak to them, Joseph might very well have been alone in believing Mary's story. So when he married her, most people wouldn't think Mary had been unfaithful, but that HE had been immoral and talked her into being intimate before the wedding day - with the proof being that they moved up the wedding day to be married before the baby arrived. But Joseph, because "*he was a righteous man*" took that burden on himself. He sought to shield Mary from further harm by taking her back to Nazareth, rather than to Bethlehem. And he gave up the plans he had been making for their future as this strange new reality unfolded.

As we put all this together, we are called to see that in Joseph's journey from Bethlehem to Christmas God promises to be "*Immanuel,*" WITH US, even when the rug is yanked out from under us, so He can comfort us and lessen the pain that our plans have gone awry. We are called to see that God promises to so be "*Immanuel,*" WITH US, not just to comfort us but so He can take us to a better future than we could have ever imagined for ourselves. And we are called to see that God invites us to embrace "*Immanuel,*" GOD WITH US, even in the most trying circumstances (like a pandemic, or kidney stones, or whatever difficulties befall us). For God wants us to so let Him fill us with His Holy Spirit that we not only follow the example of Joseph to make the journey from Bethlehem to Christmas, but so we allow what the Holy Spirit wants to conceive in us, for us, and

through us to happen. For that is not only how God saves us, but also how God saves other people through our witness.

In practical terms this means that as we enter into a new time of restrictions because another wave of the pandemic is crashing upon us, we need to follow the example of Joseph and do what God commands us to do. And what God commands us to do is found in the Great Commission: “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*”

But we can’t “*make disciples*” if we ourselves are not a disciple ourselves. This means that rather than verbally moaning to other people about the pandemic, we need to be talking to God about how to live as righteous a life as Joseph did - even in the midst of a pandemic. It means that rather than spending inordinate amounts of time reading Facebook posts about the problems of our world, we need to be reading God’s Word to find the solutions God has for the problems of our world. And it means that we need to not be caught up in complaining about how the pandemic is inconveniencing us and keeping us from doing the things we would like to be doing, but instead be caught up in not only walking with God but helping other walk with God. This is because the one whom the angel told Joseph would be “*Immanuel*,” GOD WITH US, reminded us Himself in the Great Commission that He would be with us “*to the very end of the age*,” and invited us to use that assurance to go forth to be His witness in a dark and dreary world.