

***The Cast of Christmas* Week 1**
“The Faithfulness of Joseph”
December 10/12, 2021
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Merry Christmas everybody! Today begins the Christmas season here at Chase Oaks as we start a new series called *The Cast of Christmas*, about the main characters at the manger scene. Even just seeing this manger scene for me brings with it warm and fuzzy feelings, because Christmas is the best time of the year, and it retells such a wonderful and true story. It makes me want to drink hot chocolate, wear a Christmas sweater, and relish in the meaning of the season. 2000 years after the event, it all makes so much sense and demonstrates the love and beauty of God in a powerful way.

But 2000 years ago, at least for the couple in the manger scene, things were not always so warm and fuzzy and were not so clear. They were amazing and awe-inspiring, but also scary, uncertain, confusing, and at times demoralizing. We know the big picture, but at the time they did not, which will bring us to the cast member for today—Joseph.

For Joseph, as we will see, there was so much he did not know. But he went with what he did know, obeyed God with the light he had been given, and just kept trusting and doing the next right thing even when being in the middle of the story made no sense at all. We will see that, and here is our big idea today:

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When you don't know what you don't know, go with what you do know.

Some of you are in circumstances right now or are still trying to figure out life events in your past that make little sense if God as the author of your story is writing one with a good ending. Often, in the middle of our story, life events happen that are confusing and demoralizing. Maybe it is something with your family life, your professional life, your own emotional or physical health, or that of someone you love. Maybe you have experienced deep loss, and it was not the way life was supposed to play out. What do you do when the journey gets confusing, uncertain, and difficult—when you can't make sense of how things might fit into a big picture that is good? Joseph is going to teach us by example:

SLIDE _____)

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Let's go the Christmas story:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:18

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph...”

So far, so good. Engagements are always a happy thing. Joseph and Mary would have been very young. Girls were married about twelve or thirteen, and guys a few years after that, so Joseph was probably fifteen or sixteen. We also know that this teenager was a construction worker, relatively poor. And we know as we will see in the next verse that he was a godly person. He intentionally sought to obey the instructions God gave in the Old Testament law.

Marriages were arranged by parents back then and happened in two stages, the betrothal period and then the wedding ceremony that initiated full marriage. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, which usually lasted about a year. During that time the couple would usually see each other very little, but they would have been looking forward to the big wedding party and marriage after that. However, a big wrinkle appeared in the story:

Not the only time that surprise has ever happened, but this one was different. Joseph and Mary had not been together sexually, so for Joseph all he can possibly think at the time is that she must have had sex with someone else. Matthew lets us know in hindsight she was pregnant “through the Holy Spirit,” but Joseph didn't know that right away. He just finds out she is pregnant, and he knows that the baby is not his. As a godly guy who lived his life according to the Old Testament teachings, this presented a big dilemma. On the one hand, as a righteous guy in the OT way, he knew that he should not go forward with the wedding. On the other hand, he also did not want to shame Mary publicly. That's what we read in verse 19:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:19

“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

What most guys would have done is to disgrace her publicly, and in the OT law, she could be stoned to death. He didn't want her to experience that kind of public shame, so he decides to call off the engagement, a lot like a divorce, and keep it on the downlow. That choice was actually a very loving choice for Mary because it would protect her but would make him look bad—like he must have done something wrong. He chooses righteousness and love. Obey God and love people. We'll come back to that choice, but that is his plan, at least until he finally went to sleep that evening, where he has a dream:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:20-21

“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.’”

An angelic announcement to let him know that he should in fact marry her and drops the new information that

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:20

“...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

That may be clear to some of us, but it certainly wasn't clear then. He was told it was all good because this baby was from the Holy Spirit. What does that even mean? The Holy Spirit is God. God is one and three. He is trinity: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. So, God made this pregnancy happen, and we know the big story that this is a virgin birth. She hadn't had sex with anybody, but God made her pregnant with Jesus, the Son of God.

So, he knows very little, only that he should still marry her and should chill out about the whole pregnancy thing because this baby is from the Holy Spirit. That's a whole lot to take in! But two basic instructions: Marry her and when the boy is

born, name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. The name “Jesus” is a form of the name Joshua, which means “Jehovah will save” or “God will save.” This baby wasn’t just any baby, but the one promised from God for centuries that would be the one who would take away the sins of the world.

Matthew then adds that this confusing event, Mary getting pregnant while engaged, was actually part of God’s plan that had been prophesied hundreds of years before in the Old Testament:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:22-23

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us.’)”

Matthew had the advantage of hindsight, which is 20/20. The virgin birth might make sense to believers looking backwards, and it was even prophesied in the Old Testament. But that was not front of mind for Joseph. He knew very little, but:

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What he did know is that God sent an angel to tell him that he should marry her and name the baby Jesus. What he did know is that even when life is confusing, God can be trusted. So, he trusts God, obeys, and does the next right thing:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 1:24-25

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

He simply does what he knows to do, even though the big picture would have been really hard to see. Matthew doesn’t tell us about the other confusing parts of the story, like no room in the inn forcing the baby to be born in an animal shelter, or the shepherds who come to worship the baby after angels appear to them. They just store all that up in their hearts and minds and move forward to be a family.

They stay in Bethlehem, move into their first little house, and all is fairly normal. Some of you are hoping to get your first house. For others, I bet you can look back and remember your first one. A happy little family...until the next event. This next one was confusing, but really cool. The wise guys from the East. What do you know about the wise men? Let's see...how many were there? What were their names? Some of you got it. There were three wise men, and their names were Curly, Larry, and Moe. Actually, not. Matthew doesn't tell us how many, and he doesn't share their names. So, we have no idea how many of them came. What we do know is that they were likely from the area of Babylon, advisors to leaders there, and God led them to come to look for the newborn King of Kings. They go first to the palace at Jerusalem where one with the title King of the Jews lived, Herod, and ask where the newborn King of the Jews lived. That didn't go over well with Herod. He liked his title. They are guided to Bethlehem, with a celestial sign, and end up knocking on the door of Mary and Joseph.

So, the wise men aren't part of the manger scene. Jesus is now two years old, a little toddler, and they show up at the door. Joseph was a lot nicer than me, I guess. When people I don't know just knock at my door, I often act like I'm not home, especially if they are dressed in black pants and a white shirt with a book under their arm. Terrible but true. These guys weren't dressed that way though, so maybe that's why Joseph opens the door. What happens is a very unexpected surprise. They worship the toddler Jesus as God, and they give to the family in his honor very expensive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold we know. Frankincense and myrrh are what cryptocurrency used to be called. No, they were very expensive perfumes, which was one of the ways people stored wealth back then. For Joseph, the worship by these guys from the exotic east was amazing, and the expensive gifts exciting for a poor pair of newlyweds. If he was like me, he was already spending the money in his head: "We can add on to the house, get an 80-inch TV, go ahead and join that golf club, put away some money for Jesus for college." They had never seen that amount of money in their lives and never expected to.

That was confusing but cool, even euphoric. But the euphoria wouldn't last long. That night, another dream with an angelic announcement that would let them know what God sent the money for:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 2:13-15

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.”

This was also not in Joseph’s plan. They were a young family trying to establish a life together and having to flee for the life of the baby in the middle of the night, to be a refugee in a foreign country was not his dream. They likely traveled on foot all the way to Alexandria, about 200 miles away. Alexander the Great had set up Alexandria as a refuge for Jews in times of trouble, so there was a large Jewish population there. The money from the gold, frankincense, and myrrh almost certainly is what made that sojourn possible and much easier, but still—not in Joseph’s plan. That would have been really disruptive and really confusing. Why would God allow that to happen to this baby of all babies? And Joseph had no idea how long Herod would live and how long they would have to be refugees in a foreign country. It would have been really hard for him at the time to put this together with a big picture plan.

Once again though Matthew, with the gift of hindsight, lets us know that this indeed was not an interruption from the plan of God but part of the plan of God that had also been prophesied centuries before:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 2:15

“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”

Looking back, Matthew could see it, but there was no way Joseph did at the time.

What does he do? Well,

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When you don’t know what you don’t know, go with what you do know.

He knew God could be trusted. He knew what God had asked him to do in the short run. So, we read it already:

He did exactly what he knew to do, even though he had no clue how that would have fit some bigger plan. They would end up staying in Egypt at least several months, probably close to a year. And then another angelic announcement in a dream giving him the next immediate thing to do:

SLIDE _____) Matthew 2:19-23

“After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.”

Joseph’s plan was to go back to Bethlehem, but the angel diverted them once again to a new location—where Joseph and Mary were first engaged, Nazareth—a tiny little village in the middle of nowhere. That may have seemed random to Joseph at the time, but it wasn’t. Matthew once again lets us know that this too was part of the divine plan as had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

This is all we know of Joseph, but the narrative tells us so much about him. He was a young guy, sixteen to nineteen years old during this story, but he was a mature and faithful young guy. When he found out Mary was pregnant and could only assume that she had sex outside of their relationship, what was he going to do? The right thing. In that culture, a quiet breaking of the engagement that would not shame her even though it would make him look like a goober. The loving thing. The righteous thing in an Old Testament way. When he got more information from the angel, he changed course in obedience to what he did now know.

Those Christmas events are heartwarming for us because we like Matthew have the gift of hindsight. It all makes sense looking back. But for Joseph going through it, the events were hard to reconcile with a good plan controlled by a good God. Even though he didn’t know the big picture, he chose to trust the one who did and obey what he did know. And that basic way of life is what got him through the ups and downs of those early years trying to raise the savior of the world.

For you and me who also face confusing times as we try to follow Jesus in this crazy world, Joseph is such a great model of how to navigate times that do not make sense. We all go through times when it is hard to connect the dots, how what we are going through now or perhaps have gone through in the past, could have anything to do with a good plan controlled by a good God. I know that many of you this Christmas are trying to put on a happy face and say, “Merry Christmas,” even though your heart is not merry. You are anxious, confused, struggling to figure out what is going on and maybe how you can possibly go on.

When that happens, learn from Joseph:

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When you don’t know what you don’t know, go with what you do know.

Like Joseph, here is what you do know. You know that God is in control. You know that God is good. You therefore know that God can be trusted. So, trust him. It’s okay that you don’t know how all this fits into the big picture, because he does.

And you know what he has already revealed. He has told us in the Bible principles of how to live through tricky times, and he has given us as the basic ethic, love. So, what has God revealed in the Bible for me to do and what does love of the other person demand? That’s what Joseph did, and that’s what we can do too.

If we do, then something wonderful happens over time. We become the kind of people we all want to become. We become godly, mature, more full of faith. It’s a way of life that one writer called “a long obedience in the same direction” that over time produces maturity, that helps us become the kind of people we really do want to become. There’s really no other way to get there. We go through confusing or difficult times going with what we know, trusting him with the big picture, and doing the next right thing, the loving thing, and we become godly over time.

Author Gary Thomas said,

SLIDE _____)

Salvation is free, but maturity comes at a price.”

- Gary Thomas.

That’s just true. Think of it like this (use glow stick) glow stick. They are so cool. I know they’ve been around a long time, but I still love these. But the only way they

shine, the only way they bring out the light that is in there to bring out, is if they are broken (break it). There is a cost to becoming shiny, to becoming godly, to maturity.

Joseph was the kind of guy willing to pay that cost over time. Some of you are in a difficult marriage, and you don't understand why it has to be that way. Some of you are in a confusing job situation or financial difficulty, and you don't know why you'd be going through this. You may be in a confusing situation with your health or that of someone you love. Maybe you've lost someone close to you and your plan was to share the rest of your life with that person. How does any of that fit into a bigger plan? What do you do when you find yourself in that moment? Do what Joseph did.

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When you don't know what you don't know, go with what you do know.

You actually know a lot. You know God is in control and he is good. You know that God does have a plan even if he hasn't filled you in. You know that he can be trusted. So, trust him. And take the best next step in front of you. And keep taking the next right step, the next loving step, in faith that somehow this is working toward something. And if you do, you will start to shine brighter, know God more deeply, become the kind of person God is cheering for you to become. One day in hindsight, and it probably won't be until heaven, you will see how all this was part of a bigger plan. Until then, trust God with that and keep doing the next right thing.

Let's take that to him in prayer.