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Text: Matthew 1:18–25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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She was the mother of two kids under six, scarcely a year and a half apart in age. Recently reconciled with their father after a trial separation, and also starting out on a new career opportunity that was both demanding and rewarding. Then came *elder care*. On top of trying to be engaged with their kids, and offer them the “quality time” which parents now often talk about, they also had to make room for, and tend to the ever-growing needs of, parents over the age of eighty.

She was often exhausted, or at least looked it, and when I saw her, it was clear that her ready smile was weaker than usual.

“What’s the matter?” I said as I hugged her warmly. “Is life getting to be *too much*?”

“Yes!!” she snapped back instantly. “And it’s not even *my life*.”

In truth, of course, it *was* her life, the life she had made for herself between husband and children and career and aging parents: a soccer mom, a Hollywood industry mom, a Lutheran church mom, an excellent cook and home-maker with precious little time even to be at home, let alone “keep house” in the traditional sense.

Life is, in fact, overwhelming for many of us. Even the *good* stuff can be more than we can bear — the lives we have made for ourselves, the opportunities we jump into, the doors that open to us, the richly-rewarding relationships: in love, in community, at work, in church, that make life both worth living, and at times hard to bear.

He was a promising young attorney, a recently elevated partner in an important international business law firm. He had a growing number of substantial business clients, and handled their corporate needs with intelligence and professionalism. His love life was not nearly so successful, having

broken out of one marriage that had proved to be toxic, but now seeing a lovely young bi-coastal career woman. He was a home-owner, and when he had time he was painstakingly restoring a vintage bungalow to its original glory—with his own hands stripping the layers of old paint off the woodwork inch by inch. But in the midst of it, the well-respected law firm which was his profession and his bread-and-butter, began to fall apart in high places: some partners were bailing out, taking their clients with them. There was irreconcilable tension in the office which made getting his work done on time even harder. Finally, he said to me late one Saturday afternoon, from behind a high stack of papers and files, “I hate my life.” Jokingly, of course, but truthfully.

We are now at the crowning hour of Advent, that curious season that Christians observe to get ready for the coming of Christ, when everybody else in the world is getting ready for Christmas. We are a curious lot, aren't we? For Advent encourages us not only to *wait upon the Lord*, when we are stressed to the max and know that “time waits for no one”, but also to “have hope,” in a world that promises instant gratification. No need, for example, to long for that 52" plasma big-screen TV. We can deliver it *before Christmas*, and no payments are due until 2009!

What *does* it mean to *hope*? What does it mean to *wait upon the Lord*? What does it mean even to *manage* the lives we have made for ourselves *and* the things which life throws at us, with little warning and no mercy? Things which *ought* to be joyous become unbearable. Things which *ought to be* satisfying become empty. And sometimes little things, which we *ought to be* able to handle in stride, somehow drain us so completely we don't know how to cope.

He was a good man, with a solid upbringing and a concern to do the right thing, to live by the right ethics in all situations. Living in a small town, he had a promising trade which would keep him gainfully employed and provide a decent living. He was religious, as well, in the sense that obedience and propriety had been formed in him by his parents and by the priests and teachers of his youth. And he was *about to be married*—happily engaged to a sweet and proper young girl of marriageable age who, he was sure, came from an *equally decent* and wholesome background.

And then, not long before the day of the wedding, which would be a joyful uniting of two families as well as two hearts, he discovered that his fiancé was pregnant, and that she could not, or would not identify the father of the child who, by upright standards, would be expected to marry her *instead*. This was something which his own carefully-managed and responsible life had never anticipated, and for which his solid religious upbringing had not prepared him.

Unlike my other two friends, I will identify this man: Joseph, by name, a carpenter by trade, engaged to Mary, who was, as the story is told here, “with child.”

How on earth, my friends, can we understand the spiritual struggle that is telescoped into these few verses of the Gospel reading, and which form the “back story” of the “Christmas story,” if we don't first understand the deeply human struggle here—which is not at all explained for us.

It doesn't tell us what anxiety, what hopelessness, what *anger*, what confusion may have gone through Joseph's mind. **We** have to bring that *to the story*, out of our own experience, don't we? We *have* plenty of experience with anxiety, with anger, with confusion and yes, with hopelessness in life. Life is overwhelming, and the spill-over of others' lives onto our life can be heavy, indeed, to carry.

And this story doesn't tell us *how long* the inner struggle, like torture, went on inside

Joseph's head. We're told he was decent. And *even though* Mary's disgrace was monstrous, *huge*, ... *even though* he had it in his power to carry out an honor killing to get rid of this apparently-adulterous woman, his own decency prodded him, nagged at him, not to be angry, not to get even, but to quietly end the relationship without harming his fiancé or her child.

I have purposely re-cast this story a bit anachronistically — that's the long word which reminds us when things are artificially taken out of their proper times or era and put into another. So it's a bit dangerous or frivolous of me to *imagine* Joseph's secret thoughts, or to imagine his inner struggle as if it was very similar to the struggles of my friends, the mother of two and the rising young attorney. But *I do this* because the human turmoil and the human struggle sets the stage for the spiritual struggle.

There are a lot of dynamics here, aren't there? Joseph's *religion* probably prepared him to think and act and make decisions *ethically*. He knew right from wrong and was determined to do the *right* thing. But he could not escape the enormous headache of deciding *what was* the *right* thing to do! Like people everywhere, he also lived in a *social* setting where making the wrong decisions could lead to being ostracized or shunned by his friends and neighbors, his entire community of relationships in which he both lived and made his living. Add to this the uniformity of religious beliefs he shared with his community—unlike anything we have today where everybody in your neighborhood, or across this city, is pretty much free to believe anything at all or nothing at all.

Now, let us enter into the *religious* question. The story here is thick with religious language we don't use much any more. An angel (one of those mysterious, bright and radiant, winged messengers of God) appeared to him and gave him an answer: Told him what to do! For those people in our world today who want religion to give them the answers to life's tough questions, this is "a slam dunk." Just wait for God to send a little angel, or a guardian angel, or an archangel through the skies, to take away life's ambiguity and tell you what to think, what to believe, what to do when life is overwhelming. But what about the rest of us?

Can we talk? Can we be honest? *None* of us has that faith. None of us waiting upon the Lord and simultaneously trying to do the last-minute things to get ready for Christmas, has the kind of faith which hopes that an angel of the Lord will come in the nick of time with all the answers.

I don't think Joseph had that kind of faith, either. I'm not picturing the Joseph of stained-glass windows or the Joseph of pretty picture Christmas cards. I'm thinking of someone who *lived*, though in a different universe as it were from mine, and with whom I really have only one thing in common: we wait upon the Lord. In this scene, as I hold it in my mind, and weight it, lift its heft and try to enter it as another man of faith living by the grace of God two thousand years later, I think the story of the angel is the "picture language" of the story of Joseph's inner spiritual torment, spiritual struggle, spiritual indecisiveness.

But my clue here is that the appearance in his dream is of a voice which was *not* his own. This wasn't simply his *subconscious mind* echoing back his best thinking, or processing all the potential choices he faced in a difficult decision to get out of an impossible situation. The voice which the story calls an angel tells Joseph to do something he had probably rejected as unthinkable: he was to *keep* Mary, as his *wife*, and to *keep the child*, as *his* child. He was to accept things into his own life which he had never allowed in: Impropriety. Shame. Scandal. For by taking this pregnant Mary into his own home, Joseph would be allowing his neighbors to think either that *he* was the father *out of wedlock* (a shameful thing to the whole community), or that he didn't care whom Mary

had been with and *how* she got pregnant (an unthinkable breach of ethics).

Yet when he awoke, he was *certain*, CERTAIN, that this voice was from God, and that God's message was to accept this scandal as the Lord's doing and as God's will.

I think, my friends, this touches a universal thing – no, not marrying virgins who are pregnant! What is *universal* is the deeply troubling *spiritual work* of discerning the voice of God in our crazy and unmanageable lives, and accepting the counsel and the will of God which is *at odds with* the things we think that life is supposed to bring us. For Joseph, “the will of God” was completely, utterly, irreconcilably, *outside of, and in opposition to* what his religion had taught him! Yet his human experience with anxiety, with anger, with confusion and yes, with hopelessness, led him to break free from tradition and ignore the binds and rules of religion, and the expectations of society, in order to let God work in his life.

It is almost Christmas. In another day and half, we'll toss aside the spirit of Advent with the giddy spirit of rejoicing. We so often think The Christmas Story is really Mary's story. In the typical creche scene Joseph stands as a silent, boring protector, looking awkwardly out-of-place. In the story, we're told that the *Holy Spirit* is the real father of the Child, — that somehow God's Spirit overshadowed Mary so that her Child was Divine, and Joseph had nothing to do with it. *I* submit that the Spirit of God worked in Joseph, too, *powerfully*, to make of him a man determined to rise above shame, impropriety, confusion, anxiety, and hopelessness, to make unthinkable – hard – decisions, and to live a very different life than he had planned, so that God could work through him, as God was working through Mary. Joseph's very human struggles, like ours, shaped him to *seek to know* the will of God for his life, and to live it out somehow, with grace and hope and joy.

What's your story? We all reveal some, or quite a bit, of our stories with family and trusted friends. But many of us go through our entire lives keeping our struggles, our uncertainties, our fears, even our *anger* bottled up, inwardly misunderstood and un-processed. Life can overwhelm us even when it's not *our* life, but the lives of others which spill over on us. Some of us dutifully go on year after year, quietly chanting in our sleeplessness, “I hate my life.” Is that your story, even a little bit? Then Joseph is your man, and his Christmas Story is your Christmas Story. God is speaking to you. God can use you. God will work through you. It may go against what you expect, or want, or think you can handle. But God is with you, and if you ever cry out in confusion or pain or hopelessness, God's voice will answer you. Believe it! Trust it. Live it. Amen.