

Amen. Today we consider Matthew's account of Jesus' birth: *"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

Christmas Day is one week from today. Does that strike panic into your heart? It does for me. Christmas is awesome and exciting! There's just so much to do this week. Are you ready? It's funny because when you're a kid it's like "Can't Christmas come any faster?" and as adults we're like, "Can't we have a little more time?" It'll be here whether we are ready or not, and it all feels like it's out of control: coordinating our schedules with our families' schedules, getting things packaged up by the shipping deadlines, staying on top of our health, our jobs, our attitudes, and dealing with the way others in our circles think of Christmas. Is it more about presents and family or is it more about Jesus? Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays? Are they going to church on Christmas or not? That's largely out of our control.

Today we hear the Christmas story – not the well-known version from Luke chapter two with the census, the choirs of angels, and the astonished shepherds. Today we hear Christmas through the eyes of Joseph. He was also not ready for Christmas. Things just started happening so fast, it was out of control! We can imagine Joseph planning out his life, having his own hopes and dreams. He would marry Mary without incident, they would settle down to a quiet life in Nazareth and have children. Hopefully one of them would go on to take over the family carpentry business.

But that carefully planned future was not to be. Maybe we should write a song: Joseph did you know? Did you know your fiancée is already pregnant? Did you know that the child is going to be a target for a jealous bloodthirsty king – Did you know you're going to have to get out of the country for a while to protect the boy? Joseph did you know when he grows up you will face ridicule and persecution because of him. Did you know your own people will conspire with Rome to kill him? Did you know that at least one of your remaining sons will also be killed for being his big brother's disciple?

Of course Joseph didn't know any of this yet – and what little he did know was already overwhelming and out of control. He had no say in any of it. This was God's plan. Not his. So what did he know? The woman he was pledged to marry was pregnant. He knew the child wasn't his. Presumably, she told him about a visit from the angel Gabriel. How could he not have believed her? Didn't Joseph trust Mary? That may be our gut reaction but when you think about it and try to put yourself in his situation, Joseph's doubt was very reasonable! If someone tells you, "An angel told me this," we *should* be skeptical. And this wasn't a little thing like "God told me I should apply for this job" but "God told me I'm going to be pregnant with his Son." In the face of this life-altering news, Joseph showed remarkable compassion towards his bride-to-be who, he could

| Matthew 1:18-25 • December 18, 2022 • Out of Control Christmas
only conclude, was either suffering from hallucinations or dishonest in the most blasphemous way imaginable. Being pregnant outside of marriage was punishable by death by stoning. Joseph may well have been angry or frustrated but, the Gospel tells us he was a just man (he was a good guy) and wanted to protect her by calling off the wedding quietly.

But if things weren't already out of control enough, then the angel also pays Joseph a visit in his dream and confirms that Mary is telling the truth. Woah! That answers one question and raises a thousand more! Of course as believers looking back on this, it just sounds wonderful to us. What a privilege, Joseph! You get to be the guardian, the human father-figure, to the Son of God! But it's hard for us to imagine what it was actually like for him, especially since the Gospels don't tell us much more.

Mary was telling the truth. This was the work of God. Nevertheless, the course of Joseph's life was permanently changed, and not of his own choosing at all. His firstborn would not be his own biological child. Those situations are tough pills for us to swallow today too – when you've dreamed of having children of your own but something prevents that from being possible. "Not only that, Joseph, but you don't get to raise him the way you'd like. God has other plans for him. In fact, Joseph, you don't even get to choose his name. God already picked a name for him. You're going to call him Jesus." Joseph may have been the head of his family but he was not in control. His perspective was broadened to see that he was just filling a small, supporting role in God's big story. And he filled it gracefully.

In our own out of control Christmas preparations, we are not as compassionate as Joseph. Sometimes this season brings out the best in people but it also brings out the worst: impatience, frustration, worshipping the god of commercialism. It's the most wonderful time of the year but for many it is also the most difficult time of the year – for those who have lost loved ones Christmas brings fond memories and the pain of loss. You don't get to choose who is here and who is not. How have our families changed from Advents and Christmases gone by? Perhaps new children and grandchildren have been added – but perhaps there's been death, divorce, drug addiction, depression and all manner of brokenness – all of which is largely out of our control.

But as Christmas and all of its associated circumstances, emotions, and checklists spins out of control, consider the hope God gave Joseph. As Joseph's life was spinning out of control, it was a blessing to him that God chose the name of Mary's Son. "You shall call his name Jesus." What goes into choosing a name? Does it have a nice ring to it? **Jesus** of Nazareth. **Jesus** the Christ. Will he be called by a nickname and is the nickname acceptable? Is it unique – maybe God didn't want his Son to have the same name as all the other boys in Galilee. But not too unique – we don't want him to have to spell it out all the time! Those are things we consider when we name our children but the most significant factor for the name of God's Son was the

| Matthew 1:18-25 • December 18, 2022 • Out of Control Christmas
meaning of the name. Jesus – or Y’eshua, Joshua – means “Yahweh saves.” *“You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

Joseph, did you know? There was so much Joseph didn’t know yet. But in all of his confusion, frustration, doubt, and lack of control over his own life, he *did* know this one thing: “the child born to my Mary is here to save me. He’s here to save **us** from **our** sins, from the guilt of the sins I commit, from the injustice of sins committed against me. He’s here to save us from our disordered desires for things that are far less than what God has prepared for us. He’s here to save us from the results of sin- the rage, the fear, the sickness, and the dying – Jesus will save us from this!”

That was Joseph’s hope and ours. In joy and in sorrow, we look to Jesus, who saves his people from their sins. And in this we can rejoice that we are not in control! It is entirely in God’s hands. He carefully planned for Jesus to save us before we were born; before the world was made. He planned for a young virgin named Mary to be Jesus’ mother. He planned for a good man named Joseph to be the guardian of Jesus. And it was also his plan for this Jesus to suffer for Joseph’s sake and ours. It was his plan for Jesus to conquer death and prepare a place for us in a new heaven and a new earth. It’s all out of control – out of our control but completely in God’s control.

So, in the madness of Christmas preparation, remember that God’s in control of the big picture. God may not finish your Christmas shopping for you or get your cards mailed out but He already has your salvation and mine perfectly planned out. Jesus has already followed the plan and accomplished the decisive victory in his death and resurrection. God has in mind a big renovation project in the works for the earth and for each of our bodies and souls. And unlike so many of our plans which fall short and get out of control, God’s plan is perfect. He will do it. We may not be ready but God is. In fact he’s already set to work. As he told Joseph – “You will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.