

Matthew 1:18-25  
Love Can't Wait  
December 22, 2019  
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\*Title Slide

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

\* "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her *quietly*." As I read the author of Matthew's birth story this week, I wondered what it would be like, in our world today, for a young couple to break up quietly. I mean...social media has allowed us a front row seat to our friends and acquaintances dismissing each other in many ways, sometimes not so quietly.

I recall surprise Facebook relationship status changes, when one person is suddenly no longer “in a relationship,” but “single.” This is sometimes followed up with the other person in the relationship responding, “This is how you are breaking up with me?” Or there was the woman who famously broke up with her boyfriend by posting, on Facebook, a picture of a piece of lingerie that was not hers. She wrote, “Hey ladies, I found this in my boyfriend’s, now ex-boyfriend’s, apartment. He has no idea who it belongs to. It’s a size small from Target. I just want to be sure it gets back to its rightful owner. If it’s yours, just give George a call. He’s definitely free.”

Dismissing him quietly.

The author of Matthew called Joseph righteous for his plan to dismiss Mary quietly. I have to admit, I began this week with an attitude about Joseph and his righteousness. Maybe it was because last week’s text was centered so completely on Mary that the pivot to Joseph was too abrupt. Maybe it’s because I wondered, in the small town of Bethlehem, was “dismissing her quietly” really a thing? There is no way to know the exact population of Bethlehem for sure, but I’ve heard scholars throw around the number 300. So, in a village of 300, how exactly, will this be kept quiet?

Or maybe my attitude was more about it seeming like Joseph didn’t believe Mary. To be fair, the text doesn’t say how Joseph found out she was “in a family way” and it doesn’t tell us what, if anything, Mary said to him. But, in my imagination, I imagine Mary saying, “Joseph, a strange thing has happened. I’m expecting a baby. God’s spirit is doing something new through me, through us.” Joseph’s response, “You cheated on me. It’s over.”

A colleague and I had a meeting over the phone to talk about this text and I found myself responding to his defense of Joseph by yelling that imaginary conversation at him. To which he responded, “Good lord,

Kelley, you are just making stuff up now.” I responded (not quietly), “In this text, the only one who truly stands up for Mary is God.” And my friend said, “Now that will preach.” God, through the angel, says to Joseph (this is my paraphrase), “Believe Mary. She will give birth to one who will show all people a new way to be. Name him Jesus. He is your son. Like Isaiah talked about a new beginning through the birth of a baby, this baby is a new beginning. Through him, people will see God.” After this angelic encounter, Joseph did the right thing.

That’s where I started the week. The truth is, Joseph did not have an easy decision. The text says he was “engaged” to Mary. That’s a really poor description of Mary and Joseph’s relationship status. Some background about early Jewish marriages is helpful. What the text is calling engagement was a formal contractual matter, usually decided between the fathers of the couple. It was essentially the first of two stages of marriage. The second stage, which included a ceremony, a wedding feast, and the woman moving into the man’s house, was completed some months after the marriage agreement. In the meantime, the first stage was a legally binding contract that required a divorce if there was a reason the couple should not be together. And according to Jewish law, adultery was one of those reasons. For Joseph not to divorce Mary if she had committed adultery was not only counter-cultural, it was against the law. Joseph’s desire to avoid public humiliation, and even worse for Mary, while perhaps unrealistic in that small-town context, was admirable and certainly courageous given the circumstances.

Joseph was probably a pretty good guy. And being the hopeless romantic I am, I really want to believe that he was motivated mostly by his love for Mary. And if he didn’t believe her at first, I hope she was never aware of that. But alas...maybe I am overthinking Joseph. While Matthew’s birth story seems pretty Joseph-centered, Joseph is not even really the point. The point isn’t even really Jesus’ birth. The point

of Matthew's story is the *identity* of the one being born. Jesus' identity was so important in the Gospel of Matthew that the book begins with the genealogy of Jesus, you know, "Abraham was the father of Isaac and Isaac the father of Jacob..." This section ends a little awkwardly though. Rather than "Joseph the father of Jesus," we read, "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born." Not surprisingly, the author of Matthew used his birth story to kind of tidy that up.

To start, in Joseph's dream, the angel addressed him as "son of David," reminding us that the expected baby could be son of David only by being related to Joseph. Through the act of naming the baby, Joseph acknowledged him as his son. In effect, Joseph adopted Jesus, incorporating him legally into David's genealogy. This was important because in order for Jesus to be the fulfillment of messianic prophecy, he had to be from the line of David. Thanks to Joseph, Jesus' place in David's family was secured.

But there is more to identity than familial belonging. The name Jesus itself expands on his identity. Jesus is Greek for the common Hebrew name Joshua. Joshua is derived from the verb "save." The angel explains, "for he will save *his people* from their sins." It isn't until later in the gospel when we observe the gospel writer's attention to the ones who are sick, poor, oppressed, and even finally the Gentiles, that we understand exactly who Jesus' people are. Jesus came to save all of them from sin. We, being the products of later Christian tradition, have a tendency to assume that Matthew's understanding of sin refers to the *individual* sins of the people. It is clear, though, that the sin Jesus, if he was to be the fulfillment of messianic prophecy, came to address was corporate or collective sin. Jesus came to save his people from a world in which they were perpetually "the other," the oppressed, the ones on the margins.

That was the kind of salvation for which God's people had waited and hoped, the kind of salvation that had alluded them for generations. It was the essence of what they hoped for in the Messiah.

\* Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 reminds us of this history in which the people of Israel longed for peace. The prophet promised the birth of a child named Emmanuel, "God with us," would be a symbol of God's intent to save the nation, to do something new, to bring peace and justice. For Matthew's community, Jesus' birth was the same kind of symbol. It was an apocalyptic event, beginning the first step in the transition from the old age to the new; to the fulfillment of God's promises when finally, Isaiah's vision of a new day of shalom would come to be.

And as I have said repeatedly throughout this season, we must hold tight to that vision. Just as first century Jesus gathered a community of followers around him, whose work was to reveal the true character of God, saving the ones who were vulnerable from the systemic sin that oppressed them, we are called to the same kind of gathering and saving work. We are to be a sign to the world of Emmanuel, "God with us." And as far as I can tell, the best way to do that is to love other people.  
\*Love can't wait.

Going back to Joseph, it occurs to me that, whatever he said or did in the moments shortly after finding out Mary was unexpectedly pregnant, did not have to define him. He did a brave, loving thing by saying yes to what God was doing. Joseph was a sign to Mary of Emmanuel, "God with us." He was grace. He was sacrifice. He was security. In the days, weeks, months, and years to come, he would say yes to what was God was doing over and over again. I wonder how he felt the day he named Jesus. I mean, in that patriarchal culture, the birth of the first born was a big deal, crucial to the family line and

property transfer. The fact that Joseph gave all of that to Jesus is really quite remarkable.

Joseph chose to be Jesus' family. Before he even knew him, he chose him. That is trust. That is love. Most of us, when it comes to the family we choose, at least know them first. We choose our life partners after getting to know them. We find out who they really are and we love them anyway. Consider for a moment your close friends, the ones who have seen you through the good, the bad, and the ugly. Most of us think of friends like that as family that we choose. John and I received a photo Christmas card from a family we consider close friends. As we stood in the kitchen looking at the pictures that we recognized from events we had been to together, I said, "It's weird that they didn't include us on their Christmas card." John agreed.

And we talk about the people we go to church with as our "church family." This is family you chose. The family you chose is not perfect and as much as I love us, we are not always particularly lovable. I think what makes this chosen family special is that we are under no illusion that we are alike. It's a family held together, not because we agree on everything, but because we agree on one thing. We are here to love people. Love can't wait.

What if Joseph had waited until Mary's life was a little less messy, until she was a little easier to love? We cannot wait for people to be lovable to love them.

It is when we are the least lovable that we need to be loved the most. It is when our anger and frustration cause us to be sarcastic and rude that we need to be loved.

It is when our water is shut off and we haven't showered in days that we need to be loved.

It is when our addiction has left us hungry and homeless that we need to be loved.

It is when our physical pain turns us into constant complainers that we need to be loved.

It is when our depression keeps us from returning phone calls and texts that we need to be loved.

It is when we work so much that we don't have time to mow the lawn or worry about what the neighbors think that we need to be loved.

It is when our own hurt hurts others that we need to be loved.

Love can't wait.

Sarah Are created a poem called "Love Can't Wait":

| [sanctifiedart.org](http://sanctifiedart.org) |

When people talk about love

They talk about heartbreak.

They talk about the love that got away,

And the love that left them longing.

When people talk about love

Rarely do they say, "be brave."

I wish they would.

To love is to pull the oxygen from your lungs and to say,

"Here, take a breath."

To love is to come out from hiding,

To allow the light to shine on you.

To love is to wear your heart outside of your body—

Fingers crossed that the holder handles it with care.

To love is to trust that sometimes hurt and pain come with the territory,

But you're going to love anyway.

So love anyway.

Love like there's no tomorrow.

Love as if love is not a scarcity.

Love like Mary, who cradled a baby amidst the threat of being stoned.

And love like Joseph, who took a child in that he knew was not his own.

Of course I say all of this because I need to hear it too.  
There are dusty corners of my heart that I still protect—  
Love stored up like grain  
While the world is in famine.  
So the next time you see me,  
Remind me to be brave.  
The next time you see me,  
Invite me to stand in the light with you.  
The next time you see me,  
Handle with care and maybe,  
Just maybe,  
We'll find a holy and wild Love that won't wait.  
When people talk about love  
They talk about heartbreak.  
Rarely do they say, "be brave."  
I wish they would.  
Amen.