

Advent 3

Matthew 1:18-25

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Scripture

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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce 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 become pregnant and give birth to 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 given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Let's circle back to Joseph in a minute and talk first about success, specifically the success of people who are not ourselves. First, how do you feel when someone else achieves or receives something you would like to achieve or have? Are you able to celebrate with them? Or do you feel jealous, perhaps so jealous celebration is difficult?

I would guess there are times for each of us when it is easy to celebrate the success of others and there are times when it's harder like when your coworker gets a promotion, and she hasn't been working there as long as you have. Or your entrepreneurial friend escapes corporate life and launches a thriving business and you are still hanging out in your cubicle. Your sister has found the secret to being a working mom without compromising time with her adorable family. Or perhaps your friend is feeling good having joined a gym and started yoga while you've caught up on Yellowstone, Ozark, and the cheese of the month club.

We've all had this moment; the moment where you know you *should* be happy for another person's success but really you just feel resentful and wish you had whatever they have. "Why do they get the promotion?" we ask ourselves. We know we should celebrate the accomplishments of other people in our lives, but it is so hard sometimes. Why is it easier to tear each other down rather than build each other up? "She got the promotion because she sucks up to the boss. His business is successful because his parents gave him the startup money. It's not possible to balance work and home life. She isn't really spending quality time with her kids. Also, I like cheese."

Gretchen Rubin, podcaster and author of *The Happiness Project* addressed this struggle in a column she wrote for Slate online magazine a few years ago. She wrote, "My sister works in L.A. as a TV writer-a notoriously competitive, jealous, back-biting industry. A few years ago, one of her friends won an Oscar for screenwriting. I called her and asked, 'Do you have the funny feeling?' The 'funny feeling' is the term I use to describe the uncomfortable feeling you get when a friend or peer scores a big success. You feel happy for that person, but also envious, insecure, and anxious about your own success." Her sister answered, "Maybe a little bit, but then I remind myself that **people succeed in groups**. It's great for him, so it's also good for me."¹

"People succeed in groups." In *The Happiness Project*, Rubin expands on this. She writes that ideally, we should be able to celebrate the success of others, but "...telling yourself that 'people succeed in groups' helps when you might be feeling small minded and prone to jealousy of others' good fortune. A generous outlook toward others, she concludes, is a key to happiness."² And happiness with a sprinkle of gratitude leads to joy.

Keeping that in mind, let's talk now about Joseph. You don't have to be a mental health expert to know that when he fell asleep the night of his angelic encounter, he was not filled with joy; he was not thankful and he was not happy. The future he had planned was not going to happen. He probably didn't feel good about his plan to "divorce Mary quietly," but he needed to save himself.

¹ <https://slate.com/human-interest/2009/05/do-people-succeed-in-groups.html>, accessed 12/6/22.

² *The Happiness Project*, p.242-3.

The author of Matthew's original audience was primarily Jewish, so they would have known how it went for women who were pregnant and not married. Not good. Which is strange since it was not really an option for a woman to just go out on the town and hook up with another man. In Mary's world, women didn't get to decide with whom they wanted to be intimate. That was decided for them, by a man. What I am saying, is that if there is a finger to be pointed because of Mary's pregnancy, it should not be pointed at Mary.

All of this to say, the community for which Matthew was writing would not have been surprised by Joseph's decision, even though they would have known whatever happened probably wasn't Mary's doing. The truth is women were just not as important or as powerful as men. Joseph's decision was based on what was best for him, not Mary. He and Mary would go their separate ways. He would be fine. Mary would struggle to say the least. Single women, especially single mothers, were extremely vulnerable in Mary's world.

And then, into Joseph's dream came the angel with the predictable, "Do not be afraid" and an explanation for Mary's unplanned pregnancy. The angel's message of the fulfillment of prophecy and salvation for the people was miraculously enough to convince Joseph that his place was with Mary. He and Mary would not go their separate ways. They would become a group, a group called a family. He would name the child, Jesus like the angel said, and in naming him, claim him as his own.

"People succeed in groups." I suspect the truth in this phrase isn't found in quantifiable research and data, it is much more an attitude of the heart and the ability to feel joy. I wonder if Joseph's change of heart and mind left him feeling joyful. As his perspective changed from looking out for number one to considering Mary and the child, Joseph had the opportunity to open himself up to a new kind of happiness, maybe even a new kind of joy, as he felt gratitude for the hopeful future he was promised.

Joseph began to realize that his well-being would be found in the well-being of others. Furthermore, the angel helped Joseph see that the well-being his change in perspective would bring was more than well-being for his family. He reminded Joseph of the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which

means, ‘God with us.’” God would not only be with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but with all of Israel, in fact, the whole world, all of us included.

When we, like Joseph, change our focus from what’s best for us individually to what is best for the group, whether that group is a family, a community, or humanity in general, we cannot help but find joy.

***Quote**

Italian author and philosopher, Alessandro Manzoni wrote, “Do as much good as you can for as many people as you can, and you will often find yourself with people who will fill you with joy.” I believe deep down we know that’s what we are called to, and we long to live into it. I mean, it is essentially the whole plot of one of the most beloved Christmas stories. Whichever version of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* you prefer, the story is the same.

It begins on Christmas Eve in London, seven years after the death of Ebenezer Scrooge's business partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge, an ageing miser, dislikes Christmas and refuses a dinner invitation from his nephew Fred. He turns away two men who seek a donation from him to provide food and heating for the poor and only grudgingly allows his overworked, underpaid clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas Day off with pay to conform to the social custom. Three ghosts, dare I say angels, visit him that night.

Because of what the ghosts show him, Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning a changed man. He makes a large donation to the charity he rejected the previous day, anonymously sends a large turkey to the Cratchit home for Christmas dinner and spends the afternoon with Fred's family. The following day he gives Cratchit an increase in pay, and begins to become a father figure to Tiny Tim. From then on Scrooge treats everyone with kindness, generosity, and compassion, embodying the spirit of Christmas. When Scrooge’s perspective shifted from protecting himself to concern for other people, there was joy on all the characters’ faces.

Joseph, through his actions, became a Holy Messenger himself. He lived a message of centering the needs of others and considering what is best everyone, not just himself. If we heed his message, we may find our lives filled with a new kind of joy. His decision to wed Mary and be a father to Jesus did more than help them “succeed”, though, because the truth is, God doesn’t call us to be

successful, God calls us to be faithful. Joseph's willingness to do what the angel told him to do was a faithful response and it quite literally saved Mary and Jesus' lives. That is the message Joseph's story carries to us today. We have within us, the possibility to save one another. We can save each other and our neighbors from being alone in whatever life throws at us. "People succeed in groups." And when we do, every time we show up for other people, we bring with us a reminder of Emmanuel, "God with us." And that, dear ones, is a message of joy if ever there was one. Amen.