

## **I'll Be Home for Christmas**

Message #1 in the series "I'll Be Home for Christmas"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
December 5, 2021

Well, good morning, everybody. Grace and peace to you in the name of God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, we bid you greetings. Thank you for joining us for worship today. It is a joy to share the word of God with you today. As we prepare our hearts for the word today, would you join your hearts with me as we go before the Lord in prayer?

Let's pray together.

*Gracious, Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this, Your word and for the power of Your word to give us life, to give us hope and to remind us that You are a God who calls us home. So, Lord, open us up to Your word and open Your word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as You can form our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. All of this we pray, Lord in Jesus name and all God's people said. Amen.*

In her book *Bird by Bird*, published in 1994, Anne Lamott tells a very powerful story. It's about an eight-year-old boy whose sister, six years old, was diagnosed with a very serious form of leukemia. This girl's parents were completely distraught, as you would imagine, and they needed to share with their son, the eight-year-old, that unless some drastic changes were to take place, his sister would die. So, they came to bear out, in truth, from the medical community that this little girl needed a blood transfusion and they believed that because of the sibling connection, this little boy had blood that was typed appropriately and would match what the girl needed. And so, the parents approached the little boy and explained to him that in order for his sister to survive, she needed blood and that there was a possibility that he had the blood type, and would he consent to them testing? He said, sure. And so, they tested the blood, and indeed it was a match. And so, his parents went to him and said, "we need to give some of your blood to your sister in order for her to survive. Your blood is the only gift that will help her to live. Would you consent to us taking a pint of your blood and giving it to your sister?"

The young boy thought for a moment and then said to his parents, "Can I let you know tomorrow?" And so, the next day, the young boy went to his parents and said, "yes. I want to give my blood to my sister." And so, they took him to the hospital, put him on a gurney next to the bed where his sister lay, and they withdrew a pint of blood from him through an I.V. and took the blood and moved it over and gave it in I.V. to his sister. After a few moments, the doctor went over to the young boy and said, "How are you doing?" The young boy opened his eyes and asked the doctor, "so how soon until I start to die?". What this illustration boldly teaches us is that you can measure a person's capacity for love by how much they are willing to sacrifice. You can measure a person's capacity to love by how much they are willing to sacrifice.

Today we are celebrating the first Sunday of Advent, and with that we are beginning a brand-new message series, a series that we are calling, "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

Many of us know that wonderful, dated but ever-present song that draws us into this season in preparation for Christmas. I'll be home for Christmas, you know, a year ago at this time, we wondered what that look like. Now, there's news about yet another variant that's coming with COVID, and we don't know what the future will bring, but what we do know is that in the here and now, there is something, there is a force within us that's drawing us to want to come home; whatever home is for you. Maybe you've been separated. Maybe you've been isolated from family. Now's the time to come home. Maybe you've been disconnected from your church family. Maybe now's the time to come home. Maybe you've been separated from God. Now is the time to come home.

Coming home, we learned some very important life lessons, especially in this series, which is going to focus not only on the Christmas story, but on one particular character within that Christmas story, the character of Joseph. And what we're going to learn starting today is that before Joseph officially adopted Jesus as his own earthly responsibility to be the earthly adopted father of the Lord of Life. Before all of that, Joseph himself was adopted by God with a very special task and we can learn a lot by looking at Joseph and Joseph's life story. So, we're going to focus in on a very special passage of the Christmas story, one that many of us kind of put into second reign, second string from the Luke version of the Christmas story. Everybody knows the Luke version. If anybody has ever seen the Peanuts Christmas special, you've heard the Luke version, but Matthew actually tells us a different dimension of what's been going on, especially through the eyes of Joseph. So, I draw you into that passage of scripture. I'm going to read it to you, but I'm also going to pause periodically and dissect to give you a little bit of a larger framework so that together we may look at the greater capacity that God is building within us, a capacity to be ambassadors of love and hope through our sacrifice.

This is what the scriptures say. Starts...

***"Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way..."***

I got a pause right there off the start. Now Matthew is a very unique gospel. Matthew of all four of the main gospels in our New Testament is actually writing to a Jewish, primarily Jewish audience. That's what he was doing. So, the beginning part we're picking up in verse 18, but Verses 1 through 17 is a genealogy. Matthew takes great pains to detail out the lineage that leads ultimately to Jesus's birth. Joseph is in there. He's listed in there almost is a direct connection to the fatherhood of Jesus. And they trace his lineage all the way back, not just to David, but to Abraham and there are some really important reasons for that. The Jewish audience that are reading and listening to Matthew's gospel is connecting the dots right off the bat they are hearing that the long-awaited Messiah, this is the Jesus that Matthew is about to tell them. It even says it again, verse 18,

***"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."***

Matthew is a great writer, right? And perhaps even a great preacher. He's telling us in advance what we're to learn before we actually learn it. This story is about the Messiah, he says. And it happened this way. One more little thing. Those of you who know me

who have been a part of this church for my tenure here, you know that I am a lover of words and I'm a lover of the original languages of the New and Old Testaments. In Greek, this word for birth is a very interesting word. Do you know what it is? It's the word Genesis. Interesting. With the birth of Jesus, God is inaugurating a new genesis. There is an invitation to a new creation, a re-creation that the birth of Jesus is about to inaugurate, and Matthew is telling the story from the beginning.

It goes on. It says,

***"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."***

One verse of scripture, this is packed with incredible information. First, I want to start with the very end, Matthew is trying to make it very clear to his Jewish audience and to all of us who are reading this millennia later, that Mary is pregnant by supernatural intervention. The phrase Matthew uses is this is from the Holy Spirit. Just want you to know in advance lest you think that something untoward is going on. Matthew makes it very clear from this opening verse of the story that God was doing something different, and God was doing something new. You paying attention, audience? he's asking. The other thing that's important, as we continue reading the passage is that it says here that Mary and Joseph were engaged. Most of us who know the Christmas story, we know that they were betrothed, but this is important to the audience that Matthew is writing to. They were engaged. Any Jewish individual in the day of Jesus knew that betrothal was serious stuff, legal stuff. They were the equivalent of a married couple in the eyes of the Jewish law. In fact, you could only break a betrothal by submitting what was called a writ of divorce. Betrothal was legally binding.

Now, hold on to that as we continue. So, you have Mary and Joseph, they are engaged, but before they live together, they're making that pretty clear, I don't have to go into details for that, right? We're all in the same page. Before they live together, she was found to be with child. It sets the stage for controversy. Verse 19,

***"Her husband, Joseph."***

Oh, wait a minute, Pastor David, you just said that they were engaged. Oh, but I said that betrothal was legal and binding in the eyes of the law. They were already married to a degree. So, the word here husband is carefully selected by Matthew. Every Jewish reader would have just glossed straight over that and going, "mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. That's exactly. I know." Many of them were going, "yeah, I've been there. Yeah. Gotcha."

***"So, her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. Planned to dismiss her quietly."***

Again, this is me, there's one word in this verse that, in my opinion, is more important than every other word in this verse, do you know what that word is? It's the word and. A-N-D. They caught you by surprise, didn't I? Most of us just kind of gloss right over that word. But in my mind, that is the most essential word, why? Because we're getting

a picture of what's going on inside of the mind and heart and soul of Joseph. Imagine this. Imagine if you were Joseph. You've looked forward to this day of all days when you would marry the love of your life and suddenly before that day arises, you discover that she's pregnant. You heard her say, "but Joseph this is from the Holy Spirit." And you went, "this doesn't make logical sense. I know what you're saying, but it doesn't make logical sense. God would do this? Do you know how long I've been waiting for this moment? Do you expect me to believe this?" What's going on in that word and is what we call cognitive dissonance. Two competing values simultaneously working itself out some solution from this competing dissonance going on inside of Joseph's mind and heart and soul. What is the competition?

He is a righteous man, and that's a very specific phrase for the Jewish reader. It means that Joseph was very true, very intentional and living his life in obedience to the law of Moses. And the law of Moses was very clear back in the day that if a young lady was found to be pregnant, especially when it wasn't from the person that she is engaged to be married with, they would consider that an act of adultery. And Mary in this case, could be stoned to death. That was the Jewish law. There was a lot at stake for Joseph. He's a righteous man. He's obedient to the law and he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, which says he loved her. What do you do with that cognitive dissonance? So, Joseph worked out a compromise, and this compromise was, he planned to dismiss her quietly. That's a phrase that means he planned to do the divorce thing and to do it under the radar to protect not only his reputation as a righteous man, but Mary's, the young girl that he loved.

You can tell a lot about a person's capacity to love by how much they're willing to sacrifice. Cognitive dissonance, so he makes a decision and then it says in Verse 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."***

OK, so a couple of things in this verse. Number one, notice at the end, the angel is articulating the same thing yet again, as Matthew tried to say at the beginning of this story. This is from the Holy Spirit. So, in just a couple of verses, the Jewish audience was reading, God is doing this. Are you listening? God is doing this. So twice now, Matthew is stressing this important point. Back up just a little bit. The Angel says to Joseph "Joseph, son of David." Many of us may know this, but I am just a lover of the word, got to say this, Joseph's father is not David. The lineage that was just presented in Verses 1 through 17 say the Joseph's dad is a different guy. Not David. Well, what's that about? It's because the angel and therefore Matthew is telling the reader, even as the angels telling Joseph, that the birth of this baby is connecting to a promise, a promise that links all of the people of Israel back to the covenant that God made with David.

Being a guy with a name, David, I'm proud in this moment, right, but something that you need to hear. When God made this promise, we're talking a thousand years until the birth of Jesus. God never goes back on his word. What Joseph is being invited into in the midst of his human circumstances and cognitive dissonance is he's being invited into the

carrying out of a promise and a plan that was long coming and bigger than anything that he could be feeling in the moment. Story continues. The angel says to Joseph,

***"Mary will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."***

Jesus. Jesus is the Greek term. The Hebrew is Yeshua - Joshua, which literally translates in Hebrew as God saves. God delivers. So, what the angel is saying to Joseph is this baby that's about to be born, this baby that is conceived by supernatural God intervention, this baby, He's going to save His people. You and the many others who will come after you. And then Matthew interrupts the story with a little bit of narration. He says,

***"All of this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet. Look, the Virgin shall conceive, and bear son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us."***

What Matthew is doing is he's tying this particular moment in time to an Old Testament Isaiah prophecy. And if you're an astute listener or reader, you might go, "didn't they just say they're going to name them Jesus? Where is this Emmanuel thing come out?" So, the Emanuel thing is really, I don't know the language. Maybe you'd know, Matt, that when you use a word like an epithet, is that the word an epithet? You know when you think of it? I get called a lot of different things besides David. So Jesus is actually named Jesus. But He's taken on the epithet of Emmanuel. God with us or literally, you know, in Hebrew, Emmanu who is with us, and El is a word that is translated as God. So, we have the with you, God. Why is this important? Let me fast forward to the end of Matthew's gospel, just for a brief moment. Look with me at Matthew 28.



Jesus is now, you know, crucified, and resurrected. He's about to ascend, and He's giving the final words of instruction to His disciples, who are going to go out into the whole world and bear witness to tell the good news of what God has done. So, this is Matthew, right? He's setting the stage in Chapter one. Look at the last few verses of his gospel, he writes,

***"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age.'"***

This is my all-time favorite verse of scripture in the King James Version. It shows God's heart for short people when God says, and lo, I am with you always. So, connect the dots beginning to end. Now jump back to Verse 24 of Chapter One,

***"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the Angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage."***

I'm not going to dissect this. You get it. We're all adults, right? Had no marital relations with her until she had born son. And he named him Jesus. Do you get the sacrifice that Joseph was being asked to make? You can measure a person's capacity for love by how much they are willing to sacrifice. What this passage of scripture teaches us about Joseph's character is, first and foremost, he is a faithful individual, faithful to God, faithful to God's word, which is the law back in those days and faithful to his betrothed in spite of the circumstances. In spite of his cognitive dissonance. We also learned that Joseph, a sacrificial, he was able to see beyond the moment. Can we do that? Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes our circumstances and our pain and our needs and our desires, they take forefront. But God invites us, we who are followers of Jesus, He invites us to look beyond our circumstances, to a greater mission, a mission that is bigger than us, a mission that is more important than what we're feeling, a mission that invites us to not just compromise with our cognitive dissonance, but to look at what God could possibly be doing in and through our struggle. Joseph was faithful. He was sacrificial. And he was obedient to God's call, even when it was not logical.

What we read is that he did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him. He got up and he did it. What we learn about Joseph is that Joseph's life reflected a character of God's son. That of sacrificial obedience. And perhaps that's why God entrusted to him the role of being the adopted father of the son of God. God saw in Joseph just the right person to shape the heart of His own son and set the stage for a promise that would be fulfilled like nothing else. God was birthing something new, a genesis and He asked Joseph to help makes that birth happen. So, I got a question, what is God birthing that He's asking you to adopt? Realize this, that no matter what it is that you are facing and some of you, some of us are facing some very powerful situations, realize that no matter what it is that you are facing, you are never alone. You have a with us God, who is with you and that with us God has already adopted you. You to help parent what he's birthing. So what's God asking of you?

Will you pray with me?

*God, we thank You for all of what You are teaching us. Specifically, that You are calling us to a life that puts You first. A life that is willing to ambassador hope and to join with You in what You are doing, especially at this moment in history. Thank You, Lord, for adopting us to help parent what You are birthing. Help us, Lord, to come home for Christmas. As we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*