

## **MATTHEW 1:18-25**

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" which means "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## **BETHLEHEM SCANDAL?**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

The story designed by Matthew at the beginning of his Gospel to establish a credible foundation for the entire premise of Jesus' messiahship and his special relationship to God is loaded with meaning. It was his way of framing Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection in a manner which supported the prophecies and all the claims his early followers made about him.

We can take the account at face value and glean from it valuable lessons about the method God uses to communicate with those whom he chooses for special tasks. Dreams by their nature are not representations of physical reality or current events. Rather, they transcend those experiences and allow a different reality to break through our consciousness. Therefore, dreams, intuitions, weird events like a speaking burning bush are all back channels

through which God can deliver a message. And the lessons about trust, obedience and perseverance are manifest in this passage.

Nevertheless, I believe there are perhaps deeper revelations to be accrued if we can play Devil's Advocate and suggest that Matthew was employing poetic license to make his point. We really have no idea about the nature of Joseph and Mary's premarital, let alone their marital, relationship. The question is, how did Mary get impregnated? It is not my purpose this morning to debate the validity of Matthew's claims of a Virgin Birth. Not being raised as a Roman Catholic, it has no relevance whatever to my faith. Jesus is revealed as the Messiah by his ministry and by the courageous continuation of it by his followers subsequent to his execution. The fact that we are sitting here today over 2000 years later still working to establish his kingdom on earth has nothing to do with his insemination.

And Matthew really didn't think through what he was reporting, initially saying that Mary and Joseph were engaged and then claiming Joseph was about to break up with her after she revealed her pregnancy. And indeed, the pregnancy was a problem. How was Matthew going to explain that?

Let's rule out premarital sex—at least between the two of them. relationship. By our standards, they were both very young. In Jewish society, girls become betrothed as early as fourteen and boys by sixteen. Marriages were arranged by the fathers through a paid Matchmaker which involved negotiations over property and a bridal fee. During engagement the couple was never allowed to even talk to each other without a chaperone being present. In other words, a sexual dalliance between them would never have occurred. The Jewish community whom Matthew was addressing would have taken this for granted.

So how, then, did she become impregnated? Is there an alternative to the Holy Spirit's intervention? Of course, there is which is another problem; and that would be rape. I doubt she was messing around with another teenager. But older men preying upon younger women has been a part of human history since the beginning of time. But then you would have to

realize that Jesus was illegitimate. That's another problem.

In any event, consider the consequences of an early pregnancy for Mary, her family and for Joseph. What was he to think? If she had been raped, she would have been innocent of blame, but it is also an ugly part of our human history that the woman gets blamed for the assault. And rather than outrage against the perpetrator, the community response to this would be to shame both the victim and her family leading to shunning. Mary's parents would be disgraced and suffer banishment. Have you ever wondered why the couple could not find a room at an inn when she went into labor? Could it have been that no one would have anything to do with them as a consequence of their shunning? And why is it that while we know whose Jesus' parents were, we have zero information about who Mary's parents were. Of course, Matthew's intent was to make the connection to Isaiah's prophecy and he therefore had to establish Joseph's lineage to David.

It gets complicated, doesn't it? But I believe the story of Jesus' birth is actually more compelling this way. Mary's courage in hanging in there in spite of her shaming is unquestioned and Joseph emerges as a true hero. In the first place, when he had already determined he was going to get out of this situation in order to save face, he had that dream where he was told not to worry about Mary's virginity which was vitally important for community and spousal acceptance. The pregnancy was explained in the dream and he was given specific direction regarding the baby's name. And to ensure her purity, they did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born.

Doesn't this speak of Joseph's unwavering trust in God? Following the dream he was determined to go through with the wedding which was probably a private affair with a sympathetic rabbi who may or may not have officiated at their synagogue. There would have been no public reception with dancing and feasting. It was a bad optic. And chances are, if they even knew about ceremony, the mothers would have spent the day crying in humiliation. For trust me, had Mary showed up at her wedding with a maternal bump, it would have been a

Scandal gossiped about in Bethlehem for years to come.

So what message do we take from this? I think we know when God speaks to us, whether it be in a dream, an intuition or a seemingly coincidental series of events that just come out of nowhere. It has been said that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. I cannot tell you precisely when I received my call to ministry, but I know it is when I was around twelve and it wasn't particularly welcome and often a source of ridicule when I mentioned it. So I tried to dismiss it because it was not what I envisioned for myself. I attempted to forget about it, but over time it kept dogging me and wouldn't go away. It took me eight years to finally relent and embrace my calling.

Is there anything nudging you right now? Have there been too many coincidences or unsuccessful efforts to dismiss the inner voice? I think because of our advances as a species that we have come to largely reject what might be regarded as supernatural. There is always a scientific explanation, right? But is there? God is patient. And God does speak to us. And guess what? God will not go away. So (shhhh)—be still and listen!

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