

The Righteousness of Mercy

Matthew 1:18-25

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Prayer: Gracious God, let your Spirit move through these words today. Speak to us so that we may truly hear, and lead us so that we may truly live. In the name of Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

We usually hear the Christmas story from two perspectives: Mary's and Joseph's. Mary's story is in the Gospel of Luke, and Joseph's is here, in Matthew.

Between the two, Mary is definitely the star. Joseph often plays second fiddle. Unlike Mary, Joseph never speaks in the Bible. There are no conversations with angels and no songs of joy. In Christmas pageants, the spotlight is on Mary and the baby. Joseph is just... there. In most manger scenes, he looks more like a random shepherd than a husband or a father.

So, why does Matthew choose to tell the story through Joseph? Because in this Gospel, Jesus is the "New Moses." In the Old Testament, Moses represents the Law, the prophets, and Jewish tradition. Joseph represents those same things. He is a "righteous" man.

Today, "righteous" can sound judgmental or hypocritical, but that's not what it meant then. It meant faithful and good.

But Joseph is in a bind. His understanding of what is "right" is being challenged. It doesn't help that he's a carpenter. He's a man who lives by the rule: "Measure twice, cut once." He is careful and cautious. But being so careful—and so righteous—is exactly what creates his dilemma.

And that is where our story begins.

Joseph is engaged to Mary, but then he discovers she is pregnant. He knows the child isn't his. Now, some scholars say engaged couples back then were allowed to sleep together¹—but Joseph didn't. He is "righteous," remember? He follows the rules. So, he assumes the only other possibility:

¹ Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospel Really Teach About Jesus Birth*, p. 102.

Mary has been unfaithful. The Law of Moses requires him to divorce her. In this case, “forgive and forget” isn’t an option allowed by the law.²

Let me pause for a moment to address a concern some of us may have about Mary’s pregnancy—the virginal conception. According to the story, Mary became pregnant without having sex with a man, and an angel tells Joseph that this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. We’ve all heard of the “virgin birth” of Jesus. For many people, this idea is difficult because it goes against medical and scientific understanding. And yet, the virgin birth is a core belief for many Christians. I want to name this here because, for some, it can become a barrier to hearing the rest of the story. But this sermon is not about the virginal conception. It’s not even about Mary. It’s about Joseph.

So, let me do a little excursus, a digression to explain how we actually got the term “virgin birth.” It’s a bit of a translation mystery.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the angel quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The **virgin** shall conceive and bear a son” (1:14). But if you go back to the original Hebrew text of Isaiah, the word used is *almah*. In Hebrew, that simply means a “young woman.” While people in that culture assumed a young, unmarried woman was a virgin, the specific Hebrew word for virgin is actually *betulah*.

So, how did *almah* become “virgin” in our New Testament?

Well, the author of Matthew wasn’t reading the original Hebrew. He was reading the **Septuagint**—the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Centuries before Jesus was born, Jewish scholars in Egypt translated the Bible into Greek because that was the common language of the day, the *lingua franca* of the region.

In many prophecies, the entire nation of Israel is called a “virgin” (Isa. 37:22; Jer. 14:17, 18:13; 31:4, 21; Lam. 1:15; 2:13). Because of this, some scholars believe this verse was already a key proof-text for Greek-speaking Jews. The translators saw a prophecy here: they believed the “virgin Israel”

² Douglas R.A. Hare, “Exegetical Perspective: Matthew 1:18-25,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: WJK Press, 2010), 93.

would one day give birth to the Messiah. This hope was even stronger because the text says the son would be called Immanuel—"God is with us."

So, when Matthew sat down to write his Gospel in Greek, that was the version he had on his desk. He saw the word "virgin." By applying this to Mary, Matthew does two things: he defends the tradition of the Holy Spirit, and he presents Mary as the very essence of Israel, that is, the "virgin" Israel.³ So, the word "virgin" shaped the story of Jesus' birth as we know it today.

There is something else you should know about this prophecy. In its original context, Isaiah 7 wasn't actually talking about a Messiah born centuries later. It was a message for a man named King Ahaz.

Ahaz was the King of Judah, and he was terrified. Two neighboring kingdoms had teamed up to attack Jerusalem and wipe him out. But the prophet Isaiah shows up with a message from God: "Don't worry. They will not succeed."

Then, Isaiah gives him a sign. He points to a young woman who was already pregnant at that time. He says, "She will have a son, and you shall give him a symbolic name—Emmanuel, which means God is with us."

But here's the catch: Isaiah tells the King that before that boy is even old enough to choose between right and wrong, those two enemy kingdoms will be destroyed. In other words, the child was a ticking clock. His growth was a sign that, within just a few years, God would destroy the two enemy kingdoms.

Now, we have to be honest: in its original context, Isaiah's message wasn't about Jesus. It wasn't about a future Messiah, and it certainly wasn't about a virgin birth. It was about a local crisis.

But when Matthew sat down to write his Gospel, he did something different. He began searching the Old Testament, looking for ways to explain exactly who Jesus was. When he found that verse in Isaiah, he saw a deeper meaning.

³ Hare, 97.

By framing Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of a "virgin birth" prophecy, Matthew was sending a signal. He was telling his readers: "Jesus isn't just a man. He is the long-awaited Messiah. And he is the Son of God."

Over the centuries, many have come to see this as a "double prophecy." It had a primary meaning for King Ahaz in his time, but it had a secondary, ultimate meaning for us—pointing toward the final deliverer who was yet to come.

Now, you might wonder why I'm taking this detour into the "how" and "why" of the virgin birth. It's because I want us to be gracious with one another. To be tolerant and understanding of each other in our divergent views.

Some of us believe in the virgin birth. That is fine. Others find it impossible to believe because of science. And that is fine, too.

Whether you believe it or not isn't actually what makes you a Christian. Think about this: Jesus never once commanded his followers to believe in the virgin birth. In fact, most of the New Testament doesn't even mention it. Only Matthew and Luke tell the story. When the Apostle Paul writes about it, he simply says Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4).

In our church, we don't require you to sign off on a list of dogmas or doctrines to belong. Like we say in our welcoming statement: we welcome the strong believers and the struggling believers alike.

To be a Christian is to follow Jesus. And Jesus gave us only two commandments: Love God, and love your neighbor. At the end of the day, it's not just about *what we believe*—it's about *how we behave*.

Okay, now back to Joseph, the focus of our reflection.

To understand Joseph's panic, we have to look at the "betrothal." In those days, this wasn't just an engagement—it was a legal marriage contract. In the eyes of the law, Mary and Joseph were already husband and wife.

The only thing left to do was the ceremony. But because they were legally bound, Mary's pregnancy looked like adultery. And according to the ancient Law of Moses, the penalty for adultery was death.

By Joseph's time, things weren't quite that extreme, but the punishment was still severe. This was Joseph's crisis. He wanted to be a man of the law, but he didn't want to see Mary publicly shamed—or worse. So, he looked for a loophole. He decided to divorce her quietly.

But how do you do anything "quietly" in a tiny village like Nazareth? Everyone knew everyone's business. Joseph was trying to solve a spiritual problem with a legal strategy.

Joseph's dilemma is one we all face. We want to do the "right thing," but we feel torn. We get caught between following the rules and answering a higher call to love. It's the classic struggle:

- Judgment versus Mercy.
- Law versus Grace.
- Punishment versus Forgiveness.

What do we do when the rules we were taught conflict with what our hearts know is right?

Jesus tackles this head-on in the Sermon on the Mount. He uses a specific pattern: "*You have heard it said... but I say to you.*" The law said, "An eye for an eye." But Jesus says, "Do not take revenge." The tradition said, "Love your friends and hate your enemies." But Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for them."

This is the "higher righteousness." It's not about following the law to the letter; it's about following the *spirit* of the law. This ethic is always defined by three things: love, compassion, and mercy.

Joseph is a "righteous" man, not because he followed the rules, but because he chose mercy. By taking Mary as his wife, Joseph proves that mercy is better than judgment—and that forgiveness is always better than punishment. He becomes a model for us today. He shows the church what true righteousness looks like.

In just four days, it will be Christmas. At its heart, this season is about transformation.

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is a mean-spirited, selfish old man toward his employees and his nephew, whom he invites to spend

Christmas with him. But when he gets home that Christmas Eve, he encounters the ghosts of Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future. The three Christmas ghosts show him all of the things he's done wrong. When he wakes up, he is a changed man.

Joseph had a similar experience. An angel appeared in a dream, and Joseph woke up changed. He was still faithful. He was still obedient. But he was now answering to a different law—the law of love.

Jesus came to lead us to a better way. He calls us to a "righteousness of mercy." When we face a difficult choice, we must be willing to set aside our old rules in favor of Jesus' new commandment: to be merciful, just as God is merciful (Luke 6:36).

May it be so with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.