

What God Has Conceived

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Friday, December 24, 1999

It appears that Joseph is relegated to a supporting role in the Christmas drama. Mary, the Shepherds, the Wise Men, even wicked King Herod get more stage time than Joseph. But Joseph doesn't seem to want as much attention as he has. All he really wanted was a relatively quiet life: be a carpenter, pay his taxes in Bethlehem, have a wedding with his fiancée Mary, and settle down to an ordinary life in Nazareth.

All of these realistic plans, however, were shattered when Mary was found to be with child. Some of us, I know, have a hard time understanding the Virgin Birth. But I assure you, Joseph had a much harder time with this than you. This was not in the plan.

Being engaged, or betrothed, was a bit different in Joseph's day. There were three stages to the process. First came the legally binding contract that was signed by the families, as well as outside witnesses. Money and gifts were exchanged, and an official announcement was made. The second stage was the period of betrothal which lasted one year, and helped to assure the groom that he was getting a virgin. Because the relationship had already been made legally binding, during this year the man and woman were considered husband and wife, even though they remained separated. These engagements could only be terminated by divorce. But what everyone hoped, of course, was that the couple would make it to the third stage when there would be a wedding, and the marriage would finally be consummated after the groom took the bride to his home.

It was during this year long period of betrothal that Mary had to get word to Joseph that she was pregnant. Can't you just imagine how difficult that conversation was? Did she tell him herself? Did she try to explain the part about the Holy Spirit conceiving this child in her womb? Did she cry as she tried to make Joseph understand? We don't know. All we know is that Joseph was a "righteous man," and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So he planned to simply dissolve the marriage quietly, and just walk away from this disappointment. But he had to be heartbroken.

He wasn't even consulted about any of this. By the time Joseph hears about this, first from Mary, and then from an angel, all the decisions have been made. Joseph just discovers that his fiancée is pregnant, that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, that it will be a boy, and that he has already even been named - Jesus. It's all a done deal. Joseph was left completely out of the loop.

We are big on process. We just hate it when God doesn't consult with us, especially when he is making plans for our life. But you know, in my experience, it just never happens that God sets up a brainstorming session with us to say, "Here's an idea! Salvation for the world. We were thinking about using your fiancée, but wanted to get your input first." No, it is the nature of God, as God, to take control of our lives, sending us to places we had not planned on going, giving us gifts we do not want, taking away things to which we want to cling. That is what happened to everyone in the Christmas narrative, and that is because it was the only way any of them could find themselves at the manger where their only hope lay.

We are used to talking about this great interruption by God in the life of the Virgin Mary, how he conceived hope in her womb, how she thought it would be her ruin, only to discover it was our salvation. But Mary had commitments. She had people who needed her, and were counting on her, and had made plans with her. So, when Mary's life was interrupted by God, Joseph's life was never again the same.

The exact same thing is true in our lives as well. Some of you here tonight are Mary. Some are Joseph. This last year, and certainly in the year ahead, some of you will directly experience the interruption of God, and others of you will never be the same as a result. Maybe it will be a parent, or a spouse, or a child, or a close friend. Maybe you will get the news over the holidays. Maybe the news you hear will be something awful like a disease, a lost job, divorce, or even the death of someone you need in your life. When you discover this is happening to someone you love, you first do everything you can to prevent it. But, a time will come when you discover that you cannot make a difference. You are out of the loop. Then, like Joseph, you face a great choice. Because you are disappointed and hurt, even if you are righteous, you will be tempted to walk away quietly from this person whose life is out of control. Certainly out of your control. The other option is that you can do something truly heroic. But for that you will need a dream, something far better than a plan. Dreams are the things that only the angels of God can bring us.

"Joseph," the angel said, "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 the people from their sins... When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, he took her as his wife...." What? Take her as my wife just because the Holy Spirit conceived something in her? What? Accept this new move, another move, as good news just so you can try out a new job? What? Discover gratitude for the gift of life through a disease? What kind of dream is that?

Most of us divide life between the sunny side and the dark side that we try to avoid. We assume that anything remotely resembling a blessing from God will come as sunshine. But God created the dark as well as the day, and we have to be careful about abandoning the dark disappointments so quickly. We may miss a dream. In fact, most dreams come in the dark when we are no longer rushing about under the sunshine.

Keep in mind that since God's dream for Joseph was to take Mary into his home, that meant God was dreaming for Joseph to share in her scandal. I find that when a baby is born shortly after a wedding, people become remarkably good at math. Everyone will assume that since Joseph didn't divorce Mary it must be because the baby she is carrying is his baby. So in taking Mary into his home, the righteous Joseph is taking in the scandal as his own. But the scandal doesn't stop there. In ancient societies single men did not live in bachelor pads. Joseph, like all men in his day, probably lived with aging parents, and a couple of widowed aunts. So, as he

brought the pregnant Mary into their home, Joseph had some hard conversations of his own to handle over Christmas. He had to try to explain to his confused mother that, no, he wasn't the father, but the Holy Spirit was. Don't you think that was a challenging discussion? And the family had to try and explain it to their extended family and friends. Thus, the interruption traveled from Mary, to Joseph, to the in-laws, to the whole related village.

Is this the dream of God? Absolutely. Central to the Christmas message is God's great dream that all our lives get interrupted when Jesus Christ is born among us. The advent of the Christ child reveals that this whole world is more connected than we may want to be. As we come to receive the interruption of what God has conceived in the lives of those we love, it is a small step to realize how connected we are to the pathos of those we don't even know. The destruction of Chetchnya is not unrelated to you. Neither are the 140,000 people who lost their homes in the floods of Venezuela. Neither is the international student who is spending Christmas Eve alone in a spartan apartment down the street. Neither is the homeless mother who is spending Christmas Eve with her children in a car. The dream of God is that we not distance ourselves from any of this! The dream of God is that we, like Joseph, take in these great scandals of the world, bring them home, pray for their needs, and give generously to help their relief.

Once a Savior is born in this world, you cannot cradle him to your breast without discovering that he is dragging the world into your heart as well. "For God so loved the world that he gave his son..." That means we cannot love God without inheriting his love for the world his son came to save.

Imagine what would happen in the new millennium if all who are celebrating the birth of the Savior tonight realized that even in his arrival he has woven us all together. What would happen in our world if we simply owned all the scandals? What would happen if no one was abandoned, and we all realized that Christ had related us to a world dying for hope? I can answer that. We would see a lot of changes. Maybe, that is what the angel meant on the night Jesus was born, when he said, "Peace on Earth."

Peace on earth. It sounds like a dream...

O Emmanuel, God with us, on this holy night give us the vision to see the hope in the tender rose of Christ's birth that emerges in the darkness of the night, hope that entwines our lives with your great dream for all the earth. Amen.