

Called Before Birth  
December 13, 2020  
Matthew 1:18-25

Even though the title of this week's lesson speaks of Jesus's call, the focus of the scripture is on Joseph. We have very little material in the Bible on Joseph, primarily this passage. Also in Matthew 2:13-15 and 19-23 where Joseph flees to Egypt after the visit by the Magi and then returns to live in Nazareth. Luke mentions Joseph only in connection with actions or references with Mary, such as them going to the Temple shortly after his birth and again when he was twelve. We also have a few indirect references, such as people in Nazareth saying, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22), or "Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:55).

Matthew uses a word translated as "carpenter" to describe Joseph. I recall as a child seeing Bible story pictures that portrayed Joseph as having a "carpentry shop" of the sort you'd expect of a cabinetmaker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Greek word means "one who builds," a "builder," with either stone or wood. In Jesus's time, houses were often constructed of stone for the ground floor, with a second floor of wood. So, building with both stone and wood was common. In addition, building projects in Galilee's Greek cities, such as Sephora, not far from Nazareth, would likely have employed "builders" from the surrounding towns.

When we look at Jesus's teaching, we find numerous references to building. There is the reference to the stone that is the "head of the corner," the building of a house upon rock as opposed to on sand, and the necessity of planning and foresight building of a vineyard (with its wall and tower). We don't see references to cabinetry. We can reasonably assume that much of what Jesus knew as he began his ministry was learned from Joseph. This would suggest that Joseph, and perhaps Jesus as well, was more a "builder," than what we usually think of as a "carpenter" in our day. You could also think of the modern "building contractor" as a model.

The point is that Joseph more than likely was a well-respected professional and was, while not rich, a man of better than average means. He earned his money from what he did, honest work, rather than by corruption, influence, tax collection, or other schemes necessary to become truly wealthy in that day. As such, we can assume he was a father and model for Jesus, both in how to be a father, and how to live one's life. All this is necessarily speculative, of course, since we have relatively little to go on from the Bible, and little of reliability from elsewhere.

Getting into our scripture now, the situation of “betrothal” needs a bit of explanation. Things were different in that day. A man and woman who were “betrothed” (to be married) were considered legally husband and wife. If the husband died before the marriage, the wife was considered a widow. During the betrothal, they continued to live apart. The marriage “wedding” was when they began to live together. Generally the wife entered into her husband’s home, to begin their life together as a family. Things work differently in our day. Now it is not until the marriage itself that the couple are considered husband and wife. Any termination of the relationship prior to the marriage has no legal standing for most practical purposes. If a woman was to find herself pregnant prior to marriage today, and the intended husband was not the agent of that circumstance, then more than likely the engagement would end and the expectant bride merely left to make other arrangements. But in that day, this situation constituted adultery, since they were considered formally married during the engagement.

We read in verse 19, **“Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”** (NRSV) By “dismiss, actual “divorce” is meant. Since they were legally married, Joseph had to formally divorce her to end the marriage. His reason would have been her pregnancy, implying adultery. That could be a stoning offense, but Joseph need not have asked for that. He is called “a just man” (RSV and KJV). He is “unwilling to put her to shame.”

The word translated as “righteous” (NRSV) or “just” (KJV, RSV) is one who observes the Jewish law. That’s not quite the same meaning as we see these words in our day. Under the law, Joseph had two choices. He could bring Mary before a the court. The Greek word does not necessarily mean “make her a public example” as the KJV translates this verse (Sherman E. Johnson, Exegesis, *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 7, p254, 1951). But it would certainly be a known event. The other choice was to issue a writ of divorce in the presence of two witnesses. That could have been done privately, or “quietly.” The words “and unwilling” might mean, “and not yet willing” or it might mean “because of his righteousness he was unwilling.” (Johnson, op. cit., p. 255). Verse 20, “as he considered this” (RSV), and ”just when he had resolved to do this” (NRSV), seems to reflect these two different possible meanings. The NRSV seems to assume that Joseph had already made up his mind.

God surprises Joseph with “choice number three,” which Joseph had not even considered. The angel appears to Joseph in a dream, and says, “Joseph, son of

David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, ...” Notice that the angel mentions Joseph’s heritage, that of being a descendant of David. “Son of” could mean either one’s immediate father, Jacob in Joseph’s case, just as for the patriarch of the same name. But instead, the angel, as the voice of God, uses the name of Joseph’s esteemed forebear, King David. That is also a proper use of “son of.” It is one that calls Joseph’s attention to this heritage, likely something in which Joseph had pride, and perhaps something that had also served to guide his life to that point toward righteousness.

That gives us some context for “... do not be afraid.” If Mary is found to be pregnant, and Joseph does not divorce her, who is the prime suspect? People could count back then, too. It would be a something of a disgrace to Joseph to have been hasty with Mary prior to the actual wedding. It’s not so scandalous in our present day, but it was, as recently as fifty or so years ago. The angel is telling Joseph not to be afraid of the damage keeping Mary would do to his reputation. A reputation he valued, especially as a “son of David.” Or, if you consider what is written about David, the angel may be calling his attention to how David is greatly honored in Joseph’s day, despite actions that could be considered blemishes on his reputation. Something more important than the nuances of Joseph’s reputation is pending. Cindy thinks the angel is saying, in effect, “I’m coming from God; I know who you are, and you are a son of David.”

As the lesson writer mentions, the name Jesus means, “Yaweh saves,” or “Yaweh is salvation.” Names were considered important then, as they had power. Today, we are more inclined to think of them as arbitrary labels. “Yaweh saves” is the same name as Joshua and Hosea, just with different transliterations into Greek and English. Jesus shared a kinship with these two important figures through his name. In many other places in the Bible, the Old testament particularly, names are chosen to mean something related to the circumstances or the role the person will play. (See the mentions of naming in the patriarchal narratives for examples, or of Hosea’s children.)

The description, “for he will save his people from their sins,” is not a vocation necessarily considered part of the Jewish Messiah’s calling. But, on the other hand, sin was to disappear in the days of the Messiah. So, this passage somewhat points toward the Messiah’s role being somewhat differently focused than was usually thought.

The reference from Isaiah was to a time during the reign of King Ahaz when both the northern Kingdom of Israel and Syria (Aram) allied together to attack Jerusalem. They laid siege to the city, and Ahaz was in despair.

**<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah<sup>[a]</sup> said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman<sup>[b]</sup> is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup> The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”**

Isaiah in fact lived to see this prophesy fulfilled. 2 Kings 16 says that Ahaz sent messengers to Assyria to appeal for their help, offering to become a vassal king. Soon after, the Assyrians, the superpower of the day, destroyed both Syria and Israel (the capitol of which was Samaria). Indeed, the Assyrians later also came and besieged Jerusalem, but the city was saved by God’s miraculous deliverance from the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35-36). “Isaiah’s thought was, ‘The deliverance will be so striking that a mother will give her child this name.’” (Johnson, op.cit. p255)

Matthew sees in this same prophesy a prediction relevant to the Messiah. He is the child who is mentioned by Isaiah, none other than this Jesus, to be born to Mary. The scripture of Isaiah never again mentions this particular baby again explicitly. The name Emanuel, “God with us,” is relevant to the ministry of Jesus. So, this particular prophesy of Isaiah has two meanings, two uses. In the shorter term, it was relief from the dangers of the siege. In the longer term, it was found to speak to the ministry of Jesus. The title “Emanuel” gives us a different perspective on his role as the image of God on earth, as we were reading in Hebrews last week.

Joseph did as the angel said. He and Mary were married later, and began to live together. They were husband and wife as they journeyed to Bethlehem. Jesus was born, and Joseph was his father, as far as the Law was concerned, because he

was Mary's husband. As such, Jesus knew him as his father, and he must have lived out his life in righteousness for Jesus to see. So much so that Jesus later prays to God on high as "Our Father, who art in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9).

So, that's about all we know about Joseph. There is nothing in the Bible about his being an old man. That idea comes from the much later Catholic doctrine that Mary remained a virgin all of her life. That's not in the Bible. That meant that Jesus's four brothers and his sisters had to have been Joseph's children by a previous marriage rather than Jesus's full brothers and sisters, as we usually assume. If Jesus had, as a minimum, 6 siblings, then Joseph would have had to be at least 10 years older than Mary and likely older by a wider amount. Again, that's not in the Bible; it's a tradition that came later. The fact that he had apparently died by the time Jesus started his ministry at about age 30 doesn't require Joseph to have been old. There were many perils to life and limb, and a profession as a builder was likely more dangerous than most. Joseph was likely older than Mary because men married older. He had also reached a state of maturity where he decided to do the right thing. Just as God chose Mary, I believe God chose Joseph. The significance of those choices was demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ, a victory of God in history over the forces of evil that lasts forever and ever.

*Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the people in our lives who have modeled faithfulness and kindness. Help us to see the ways our own character and actions can provide encouragement to others. Amen.*

P.S. I hope all of you reading this are finding blessings this Christmas season. We remain in prayer for those of our members in need. We really miss seeing each of you on Sundays and being able to visit. Things look dark at the moment as the case numbers for the virus continue to rise. Christmas reminds us that just when things seemed darkest, God's light came into the world. It is easier to see the stars at night than during the day. Yet, day is what we yearn for, with the heat of the Sun, and the light to see where we are going and what we are doing. We need both, the darkness as a time to gain perspective, and the light as a time to carry forward our own calling. So, I pray that we all may be blessed, and blessings to others, at this difficult time.

Also, in the heavens toward the southwest as it gets dark, there is the closest conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn within 800 years. The event is called "The Star of Bethlehem" or "Christmas Star," after a remarkable conjunction of planets about the time that Jesus was born, which may well have been the "sign in the heavens."