

Today we begin a series of messages that we're calling *Share Christmas*. It's a season for giving and that's because at the heart of Christmas is the story of how God shared His grace with us. Quite literally He shared Himself with us. Immanuel- God with us, that's the message at the heart of this season. And for each week leading to Christmas we're going to consider how God would have us *Share Christmas*, through hospitality, invitation, & reconciliation.

Let's begin by turning to Matthew's account of Jesus' life. (Matthew 1:18-25)

18 *This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. 19* Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

20 *As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21* And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

22 *All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:*

23 *"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"*

24 *When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.*

25 *But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.*

I would like us to consider something about this text. Mary received Jesus into her life in a unique way, and no one else ever has or ever will receive him into their lives like she did. Joseph, in some ways, is a little easier for us to identify with because Jesus coming into Joseph's life was something he could choose to welcome or avoid. And just as Jesus was ready to arrive, Joseph was on the verge of a decision that would sweep away the coming of Christ into his life. Joseph was arranging things so that he could walk away from Jesus' mother Mary.

It makes sense of course, because you can imagine what Joseph was thinking. "Here's a woman that I'm engaged to marry and during our engagement she's become pregnant with someone else's baby." So Joseph is on the verge of cutting the engagement off. In his mind, note what it says in verse 19, "because he was a good man," he thought he was being very big about this, because he was not going to publicly disgrace her. He could have made a big public show of it. "I'm ending this engagement because Mary is pregnant!" But instead he planned to do so quietly. Joseph did not want to make a spectacle out of Mary, but he still intended to walk away because in his mind Joseph believes Mary has been unfaithful.

When the angel comes to Joseph, it reveals some of Joseph's true motivation here, and it's something he has likely not wanted to acknowledge. What are the angel's first words? "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Joseph believed that he was simply doing the right thing by cutting off the engagement, but the angel says, "Do not be afraid."

Here's the point. This passage shows us that in order to receive Jesus into your life it takes courage. For Joseph, there are three distinct fears that he had to face in order to have Jesus come into his life, and they're the same fears we face before Christ comes into our lives as well.

The first is this- fear of the world's rejection.

Joseph thinks that he's being kind by dismissing Mary quietly, but the whole point is that Mary is- look at the word in verse 19- "disgraced." Joseph is going to try to keep it from being too severe, but she's disgraced. Even if he marries her now- if he marries her immediately- people aren't stupid, they're going to know. They're going to do the math. In that day, in that traditional culture, Joseph realized that it was unavoidable- that Mary's life would be ruined. There were serious ramifications to conceiving a baby out of wedlock. She would be cut off from her family to some degree. She would be socially marginalized to some degree. She was going to be disgraced- her world shattered into pieces.

Now here's an angel of the Lord explaining to Joseph that Mary hasn't been unfaithful- she's pregnant with the Son of God- but it still leaves him with a fearful choice. Here's the reason why. God coming into Mary's life in this way doesn't fit the grid. God coming into her life and impregnating her- the world is going to look at that funny no matter what she says. And for Joseph to receive Christ into his life, at this point, if he marries her- the disgrace will come to him too. The only way he can be free from sharing Mary's disgrace is if he ends the engagement, then it will be clear that she's been unfaithful to him. If Joseph marries her, and if they have this child three or four months after the wedding, then it will be clear to everyone that the two of them have been unfaithful to God together- in the eyes of that culture they are moral failures.

What Joseph is saying is, "I don't want to invite this child into my life, because if I do I will be rejected by everyone. I'll be marginalized. My life will be ruined." Here's the thing, this is true of every Christian. If you declare, "Jesus has forgiven my sins. I know Him, and I know He loves me." The world hears that and looks at us funny. The world doesn't understand the Gospel. No matter what you say you'll sound either arrogant or crazy.

You cannot receive Christ into your life unless you are willing, to some degree, to be rejected by the world. Has this happened to you? People who, before you chose to follow Christ, thought so well of you, but now think you're suspect? "You still seem like a nice person- I don't know what happened. Maybe you'll grow out of it and come to your senses?" People who once thought you were marriage material find out you're a Christ follower and that whole map gets blown up. There might be insiders at your work who marginalize you because of your choice to put your faith in Christ.

My dear friends, if this causes you to become fearful, look at Mary and Joseph. They are two illiterate, impoverished young adults, who welcomed Jesus into their lives and with Him the disdain of the world, but all the people who scorned them, have you ever heard of them? No! They're lost in the dust. But look what happens to these two who had the courage to welcome Christ into their lives.

Joseph needed courage to follow through with his engagement to Mary and to welcome Christ into his life. He had to overcome his fear of rejection by the world, but that's not all. Joseph also had to humble himself under God's leadership- he had to overcome his fear of no longer being in control of his life.

Do you know one of the most striking things about this passage is? The angel tells Joseph what he is to name the baby. In verse 21, the angel says, "You are to name him Jesus."

Listen, parents have the right to name their kids. Do you know why? Especially back then, naming was not labeling, it was a sign of authority. You only have the authority to name something that you own, basically. You only have the authority to name something that's under your management. You invent it- you name it. You start the company- you get to choose the name. You have a child- you get to name it. Why? Because the child is yours- it's your baby.

When Jennifer and I named our kids, we took that responsibility seriously. We broke out name books- any parents in the room who are familiar with name books? They're catalogues, basically, of boy and girl names- arranged alphabetically- with the country of origin for the name and the names' meaning. Jennifer and I picked names for our kids that had meaning to us. Aria is a Hebrew name that means *Lioness of God*. Meira is a Hebrew name that means *light*. Ava is the Latin form of the Hebrew name Eve which means *living one*. Asher is a Hebrew name that means *happiness*. Naming our children, for Jennifer and I, was a significant part of becoming their parents.

But the angel warns Joseph and says, "You don't get to name this child. If you want to receive this child into your life, this child does not come under your management- you will be under his." You cannot name Him- He will name you.

This is the second reason people are fearful to come to Christ. The first is because- "people will look at me funny- I might be rejected." The second is the fear of losing control over our lives. Because people ask, "If I choose to follow Christ, will I still be able to this or that?" And Jesus says to us, "You have no idea where I'm going to lead you, but if I'm your leader then you have to trust me regardless." If you can't trust Jesus to that degree- then you're not being led by Him. He doesn't explain to us up front where His leadership will take us, and that's one reason people hesitate. He's not a tame Lion. He's not a pocket-sized Savior. He doesn't enter our lives to make us comfortable. When we say, "I wouldn't want to become a Christian if He's going to make me do (x, y, or z)." Do you know what you're doing? You're trying to name *Him*. But that's not how His lordship works. He comes into our lives to name *us*. Until He comes into our lives we don't even know who we really are.

When we invite Jesus to come into our lives not to be named but to name us- when He is Lord and not just Savior- that's a humbling place to be. It is. That's the second thing Joseph had to face in order to welcome Christ into His life- and we have to face that fear too.

The final fear is acknowledging the great need we have for a Savior. When the angel announced this news to Joseph it proclaimed, *(Mary) will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

This is the scariest thing of all. I grew up going to church and I can't tell you how many times I've heard the phrase, "you need to ask Jesus into your life." And people do it, many times, not even knowing what it means. Generally, I think most people believe it means that they're going to try really hard now- I'm going to be good from now on and I'm going to stop being bad- and God will accept me because I've pleased Him. But that's not it.

The courage we need is to admit that we are helpless, that we can't save ourselves, we can't live the life we should, we can't possibly live up to God's standards. This is what takes the greatest courage of all. Do you have the courage to admit that you need rescue? Not help. Not a helping hand. Rescue.

Joseph had to come to terms with the fact that his goodness (he was a good man), was not good enough. For Jesus to come into his life, Joseph had to acknowledge the same thing we need to acknowledge- he needed a savior and so do we.

These are the three fears we must face before we can welcome Jesus into our lives. (The world's rejection; loss of control; and the need for rescue from our sin.)

How did Joseph find the courage to confront these three fears and to overcome them? How do we find that kind of courage?

When Joseph woke up something happened to him. He now recognized that Mary really had received this into her life knowing that it would completely change everything for her- her life was irrevocably altered. It moved Joseph. He could have walked away from it, but she could not, and Joseph resolved to identify himself with Mary. He reconciled with Mary. He restored their relationship, and when he did, her disgrace became his. And if he hadn't, do you know what would have happened to a single, teenage pregnant mother in that culture?

No one would have ever married her. She would have been marginalized and likely impoverished for the rest of her life. The only way for Mary to avoid that was for Joseph to give up his life, but in laying down his life on Mary's behalf, Joseph made possible the birth of Christ- the Hope of the world.

Now, here's where it gets really good, because in the same way that Joseph had a choice when it came to intervening on Mary's behalf, Jesus also had a choice. He did not have to enter this world. "Mild He lays His glory by." Do you know what "mild" means? It means it wasn't coerced. Voluntarily, *freely* Jesus lay His glory by. The only way we could be saved is for Jesus, like Joseph, to identify with us and lay His life down.

What does that mean? Joseph looked at Mary and saw her on the verge of losing her life- it was about to shatter into little pieces- but because he was willing to lose his life for her, ultimately, he welcomed a Savior into his life. Reconciliation with his future wife, meant restored relationship with God Himself.

If you and I are willing to lose our lives for Jesus- if we can gather the courage to face the fears we've spoken about today and overcome them with faith- I want you to understand, we're not really losing anything. Jesus offers us life abundant and more. He offers reconciliation with God- restored relationship with our Creator.

If you choose to follow Christ, don't be surprised when you begin to see those around you differently. When you see your co-workers, or classmates, or Christmas shoppers or street peddlers, you'll never look at them the same. Instead you'll identify with them because they are, just like me, in desperate need of a Savior- and you'll lay your life down for them, because it's what Jesus has done for you. The same heart that caused Jesus to lay His glory aside and enter this world- our Immanuel, our Savior- that same heart is now beating in you and me. And just as He came to reconcile us with God, to restore that relationship- we now have the opportunity to reflect His heart by being people who restore relationships with each other.

What does that mean? It means where before we would have burned a bridge, we build one instead. It means where before knowing Christ we would have held a grudge, instead we forgive. It means instead of walking away over a disagreement, we lean in toward compromise.

What would it look like for you to become a relationship restorer? Who do you need to extend an olive branch toward- so that the grace of Christ at work in your heart can be placed on full display?

Today, if you feel like you're on the outside looking in- if you're broken or impoverished. If you find yourself identifying with this young, single, pregnant woman and you're tempted to be ashamed-- why do you think the mother of Immanuel (God with us) was a young, pregnant, unwed girl? This is

God's way of saying, "I don't care what you are or what you've done, if your heart condemns you I am greater than your heart. In Jesus Christ you are beauty to me."

Do not be afraid to welcome Him in.