



Sunday, Dec. 23, 2018

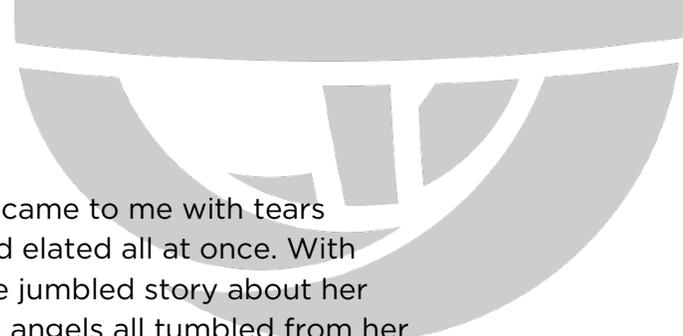
Expect to Change Course When Following God
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV

Now 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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

I'm what you'd call a common man. I'm a carpenter named Joseph, from Nazareth. If you stall built in your barn for a new goat, I'm your man. If your wife's wash basin is cracked and leaking, I'm your man. I know how to build things and how to fix things. I've never aspired to greatness, never sought to rise above my station. I just want a quiet, common life. All I really want is to settle down with a family, carry on my father's good name, and maybe leave my community a little better than it was before. Maybe you've had some of the same aspirations in your life?

When my parents arranged for me to marry our friend's daughter Mary, I thought I had it made. Ah, Mary. I've known her her whole life. She's kind and strong; funny and faithful. Any man would have been fortunate to be her husband. I had been so looking forward to getting married and had plans to live a good and simple life with her.



But all that changed not so long ago. My betrothed came to me with tears streaking down her face one day. She was upset and elated all at once. With labored breath and in between sobs an unbelievable jumbled story about her being pregnant and the Holy Spirit, the Messiah and angels all tumbled from her lips. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She was pregnant? But how? And what did the Holy Spirit really have to do with all this? She begged me to believe her story. She told me she understood how impossible it all sounded, but it was the truth. Oh, how I wanted to believe her, but how could I? This was a scandal and a tragedy, no matter how convincing I wanted her story to be.

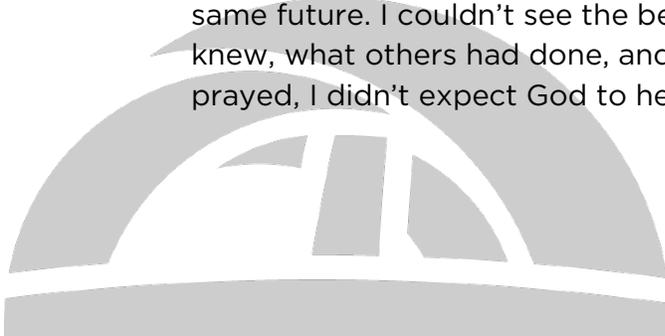
We both knew what this could mean. It could be devastating for Mary. She could be thrown out of her family, or worse, she could be stoned to death. It was my right to call her out, to heap shame on her for her unfaithfulness. And this news would have certainly brought disgrace on my family too because I couldn't hold on to my own fiancée. And what about this child she was carrying? Oh, God only knows what could happen to this child.

I needed time to think. I told Mary I wouldn't say anything to anyone and I wouldn't decide what to do until I slept on it. I went back home. I thought and prayed. As confused and hurt as I was, I was not angry. I had no reason to want to cause her harm. I love her.

I knew that if I went public with this story it would have ruined Mary's life. That's what usually happened. The law allowed it and wounded, jealous men often exercised what was lawful. But cruelty and revenge are not the only things allowed for in the Law. Just because something is legal, doesn't mean it's always right. I had other options the Law allowed for as well. I could call off the relationship, divorce her quietly before it got out to people. She could move away to be near her cousin in the hill country, and they could tell the people there that her husband had died. She could start a new life, and I could too. And the child might be just fine.

I went to bed that night as satisfied as I could be after my life had been upended by this horrible string of events. We would not say anything to anyone. We would simply go our separate ways. I wanted to make it as tolerable as possible for our families and honor God's mercy as much as I could. This seemed like the right option given the circumstances.

But it turns out doing the best thing and doing the right thing do not lead to the same future. I couldn't see the best option at first because I only looked at what I knew, what others had done, and what our traditions called for. As much as I prayed, I didn't expect God to hear my prayers. I didn't expect God to change the





course of my life. And I certainly didn't see a way that Mary and I could remain committed to one another.

That night in a dream I heard from an angel, one of God's messengers, as clear as you hear me today that I should not be afraid to keep Mary as my bride. The angel told me the same things he told her: she was pregnant of the Holy Spirit, and the child she carried would be the Messiah – and that I, the one who is not the father would serve as father and name the child Jesus – for he will save his people from their sins.

I could not come up with this course on my own. To be honest, I didn't want to – it's unconventional and uncommon. It defies what many in my community would do if they were in my shoes. I didn't think it was possible. Only God could have come up with a path so unconventional, so full of grace and mystery, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

It turns out it's true that God only knows what could happen to this child. Perhaps he will be what the angel said he will be. Perhaps he will do what the angel said he will do. I don't know yet. I just don't know. I am still a common man. And what I am discovering, day by day is that following God is anything but common. This may not be the life I anticipated, but whose life ever works out the way they think it will? I want to be faithful to God. I want to see where all this will go. It may not be the course I planned, but God has my attention, and I have a feeling life from here on out life will never be the same.

