Matthew 1:18-24

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.
thing today at least that you didn't know already about Christmas. I also pray that there will be some moment that you feel like God is speaking just to you and you may want to write that down. There also is a map inside your bulletin that you may want to reference during this sermon. The Meditation Moments will help you think and pray more deeply as you reflect on this story over the next few weeks. We also have several small groups that will be using a book and curriculum which coincides with this sermon series that you may wish to join.

Last week we went to Nazareth which is in the northern part of the holy land. This was Mary's hometown and we focus our attention on that day when the Angel Gabriel came and told Mary that she was going to have a child that would be born of the Holy Spirit. This week we turn our attention to the story of Joseph and his home town of Bethlehem.

You may know that there are two Christmas stories in the New Testament, one in the gospel of Matthew and one in the gospel of Luke. Mark doesn't tell the Christmas story at all and John tells the Christmas story in an entirely different way than we are used to hearing. Matthew and Luke's stories are in some ways very similar in other ways they are very different. We often merge them together during the Christmas season but sometimes we put them together a bit too quickly and we miss some of the finer points in each story.

Luke's story focuses on Mary and begins in Nazareth. Matthew's story focuses on Joseph and his story begins in Bethlehem. We typically think the Christmas story goes something like this, "Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth. They became engaged in Nazareth and then Mary learned that she would be with child and they got married. They only go down to Bethlehem when the census requires them to do so, just before the birth of Jesus." We get that story from Luke's gospel and then adding in a few bits from Matthew's gospel in a way that is probably not accurate.

If you only read Matthew gospel you will find that Joseph's hometown was Bethlehem. We don't even hear about Nazareth in Matthew's Gospel until chapter 2 when Jesus is probably two years old and his family had back to Nazareth from Egypt. Joseph hometown is probably Bethlehem and Mary's hometown is most certainly Nazareth and this probably was a long-distance engagement, where the families arranged for this marriage. Matthew tells us that Joseph would have gone to Nazareth and married Mary and then took her back down to Bethlehem for the census because it is his hometown.
Most scholars believe that Joseph was from the town of Bethlehem and this is where he grew up which is why we are going to focus our attention on that today. Let's talk a bit about Bethlehem and where this is on the map. Here is the map of the holy land that we saw last week up on the video screen and that you have in your bulletin today.

SLIDE Map of holy land in the time of Jesus

You see the Mediterranean Sea on the left and the Sea of Galilee on the top of the map. The Jordan River comes out of the Sea of Galilee and moves down towards the Dead Sea at the bottom of your map. We learned last week that you can divide the holy land into three sections with the top section in the north being the Galilee. The center section is Samaria and the lower section in the South is Judea. Mary's hometown was up above in Nazareth which we talked about last week. Joseph's hometown is clear down in the southern portion of the holy land in Bethlehem which is in Judea.

VIDEO Nazareth to Bethlehem (no sound)

I looked up the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem and found out that if you walked, first you notice that there are some parts of the route without sidewalks according to Google maps. The distance is 157 km which is approximately 98 miles. That would be like walking from South Fork to Durango, however Bethlehem wasn't exactly like Durango.

SLIDE Map of Holy Land in the time of Jesus (CLOSE UP of the southern section of the map with Bethlehem and Jerusalem.)

Bethlehem was a village of maybe 500 to 1000 people about a two hour walk or 6 miles from the city of Jerusalem. You can see that as we look at the close-up of the map you have in your bulletin. You also will notice a dot below Bethlehem which is called the Herodium.

SLIDE Bethlehem = “House of bread”

The word Bethlehem means house of bread. We know from the book of Ruth that Bethlehem was a place where people grew wheat and barley. They thrashed the barley and wheat and then they would grind it and bake bread and it looks like they may have brought to Jerusalem. When you approached Bethlehem you could probably take a deep breath and smell fresh baked bread. It's kind of like when you walk down in Santa Rita Park along the river trail and you take a
deep breath you smell...well, it actually doesn't smell very good but you get my
drift...pun intended. Bethlehem was known as the house of bread because it even
smelled that way.

That means that Bethlehem was home to farmers and mill workers and
bakers. It was also the home of shepherds. King David in the Hebrew Bible was
from Bethlehem and his family were shepherds. Even today you will find
shepherds who watch over their flocks in the hillsides around Bethlehem. There
also was at least one family of Carpenters of which Joseph was a part. Here is
what modern-day Bethlehem looks like.

VIDEO Bethlehem Cityscape (no sound)
SLIDE Bethlehem

This is what you would see if you visited Bethlehem today. It now is a large
town which is built up on the hillside on the edge of the Judean desert. Beautiful
hills which are almost at the edge of the desert. In Matthews day the village was
simply on one hillside but today there are more than 130,000 people who live in
the hillsides surrounding Bethlehem. There are 26,000 people in Bethlehem
proper which you can see on the top right of this hillside. The large church steeple
that you see is the church built in recognition of where Jesus was born. In the last
part of this video clip you will see what Bethlehem may have looked like in the
time of Jesus, with some small homes and then the desert off in the distance.

Bethlehem had two famous sons. Around 1040 BC King David was born in
Bethlehem. His father and brothers all lived in Bethlehem and he was a
sheepherder. You might remember that Samuel the prophet came and anointed
David with oil in Bethlehem to become the next King of Israel, the Shepherd King.
After that time the city of Bethlehem became known as the city of David, along
with Jerusalem. Today, people celebrate their second great son who was born in
Bethlehem which was Jesus.

You should know that today the city of Bethlehem is part of the West Bank
territories. Of the 36,000 people who live in Bethlehem proper 30% of them are
Palestinian Christians and 70% are Palestinian Muslims, but they are almost all
Palestinians. Those of you who have visited modern-day Bethlehem know that
you can feel the tension between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In order to
enter into the town of Bethlehem you have to go through a checkpoint and then
surrounding the entire city is a 23 foot high wall with a barb wire fence over the top. Take a look at this video footage from the wall around Bethlehem.

**VIDEO** Walled of Bethlehem (no sound)

**SLIDE** Mary and Joseph at the Wall (picture only)

This is what you would see when you visit Bethlehem today. The 23 foot high wall is meant to surround the city and keep people who live in Bethlehem inside of Bethlehem so they will not enter into Israel proper. You can see the wall from everywhere you look in the city. At various places you will see the guard towers with Israeli Defense forces who watch over the wall and the city of Bethlehem.

When you read interviews of people who live in the city of Bethlehem, or those of you who have had a chance to meet people who lived there, you get the sense of how many of us would feel if there was a 23 foot high wall surrounding Durango and you are required to stay within those walls. There is anxiety and fear and anger. The Israeli perspective is that God has given them this land from the time of Moses and every claim this land and they need to protect themselves from terrorists and outside forces. The Palestinian perspective is that people have taken their land and they are trying to take their land back. We have read about this just the last few weeks as the United Nations somewhat recognize Palestinians over the objections of Israel and the United States. The reality is that when you visit this place you recognize there is no easy answer to this conflict which has been going on for centuries.

When I look at pictures and video footage of the wall around Bethlehem I think about how the Prince of Peace was born in this place and I wonder how this could be? Is this what God wishes for his people? I think about Jesus coming down from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and weeping and saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the things that make for peace, but you would not."

The irony is that the Prince of peace did give us the answer to conflict, even conflict as deep as this one, but we just don't like the answer. Jesus said, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Bless those who wrong you."

That may be the only way to move past pain and conflict that go deep, whether it is between nations or between families. That wall stands in such stark contrast to the story that we read at Christmas, but it is part of the reality of what we deal with today.
SLIDE  What does this story tell us about the Christ child?

So what does this story tell us about the Christ child? We learned last week that women were engaged to be married when they were 13 or 14 years old, as soon as they entered puberty and were able to have children. The engagement would last for one year and at the end of that year there will be a formal ceremony to make them husband and wife. The boys would be 14 or 15 or 16 years old, whenever they were able to support a family and have learned enough of a trade to get a job. These are the ages that young people married in those days.

Marriages were arranged in those days as well so most likely Mary and Joseph had been betrothed to each other by two families, who probably were living 100 miles apart in two different cities. Once again, this was not uncommon. In the middle of their engagement Joseph find out that Mary is pregnant and he is pretty sure that he is not the father because he knows how this works as well. His father had had the talk with him and Joseph was no fool. We read about this in the Scriptures today.

SLIDE  But before the marriage took place, while Mary was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

Do you think it was that simple? Do you think it is as matter of fact that Mary discovers she is pregnant and then Joseph makes this decision? My guess is that a number of things happened after the Holy Spirit and before Joseph. My guess is that Joseph is a man who feels like the wheels have fallen off of his life. If he is human at all then he is probably angry and jealous and frustrated and hurt and wounded. He had to have all of those emotions and even more running through his mind as he tries to figure out what to do. He is a good man and so he doesn't want to expose her to a public stoning, which he has the right to do according to the law and Deuteronomy. He's too good for that, but his heart has been broken. What is a man to do in a situation like this?

Matthew tells us that Joseph went to sleep one night and when he did an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in his dream. The Angel said to him these words that we heard already today.
SLIDE  “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph then takes Mary to be his wife and the child was born, but Matthew continues with a commentary on this part of the story.

SLIDE  All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “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.’”

On Christmas Eve we will talk more about the idea of Jesus as Savior and what that means for us, but let's talk a little bit about this prophecy today. We first need to understand the context of this prophecy. You find the roots of this prophecy in the book of Isaiah. If you have your Bible you might turn to Isaiah 7 where you find this passage that was written 735 years before the birth of Jesus. In this text King Ahaz and the Israelites have holed themselves up in the city of Jerusalem. There are two Kings attacking Jerusalem, the King of the northern kingdom of Israel and the King of Syria. They have brought their forces against Jerusalem to destroy the city of David and conquer the southern kingdom of Judah. The people in Jerusalem are terrified. Imagine having your entire city surrounded by foreign troops and wondering if you're going to survive the onslaught.

The King himself is terrified and Isaiah, who lives in the city of Jerusalem, is prompted by God to go speak to Ahaz the King. Isaiah tells the king that God has sent a message to him. Here is the message. "You don't have to be afraid of these two Kings because God is with you. God is going to take care of this and these two Kings will be defeated in short order."

SLIDE  The Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin* will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’). By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong...the lands of the two kings you fear so much will both be deserted.

It was understood in Hebrew tradition that you were able to know right from wrong and make moral decisions when you were 13 years old. 13 years after this prophecy was given in 735 is 722 BC and those two Kings would be destroyed by the Assyrians.
The prophecy from this Angel of the Lord is meant to remind you of the prophecy from 735 BC which Matthew would've known. Matthew is telling his readers that the birth of this child, Immanuel, means that God is with us just as God was with his people in 735 BC. You don't need to be afraid because God will always be with you because of the birth of this child. The prophecy of Isaiah has happened again and this child, Jesus, is a sign from God that we are not alone.

God has wrapped himself in human flesh, born in Bethlehem, so that we might know that we are not alone. The God who is invisible and who rules over the entire universe shall be visible and take on human flesh in this baby so that you might know, no matter how dark your circumstances or how afraid you might be or whatever is happening in your life or the world around you, God is always with you.

Matthew wants you to know this as he writes his Christmas story—this one little line tells us that God is making clear to the human race a fundamental truth. **SLIDE** "I am always with you."

This is a powerful truth in this story and inside this truth we find a calling upon our lives. This prophecy is a reminder that God is with his people. Jesus is a physical reminder that God is with us.

If we are called to be Jesus Christ to the world then Jesus has called us to be his emissaries and a sign to others that God is with his people. If you know someone right now who was walking through a really tough time one thing they desperately need to know is that God is with them and they are not alone. How are they going to hear that if we don't embody it to them? How are people going to receive that if we don't live it in our actions the love of Christ? Our task is to come alongside of those who are struggling in this world and say, "I am here to remind you that God has not forgotten you."

Today we will be commissioning a new group of Stephen Ministers. They, along with more than 50 other people who were trained to visit hospitals and nursing homes, make a commitment to walk alongside those who are hurting. Whenever they walk into a hospital room or into living room of someone who is going through a crisis, we remind them to pray before they get there, "God, please help me to be a physical reminder to this person that God is with them."

I met recently with a member of our church who had pretty major surgery and he talked about how one of our hospital visitors came and sat with him
before his surgery. He didn't have any family who could join them because they live far away and when that person from our church walked in the room he said he could feel the anxiety and the fear leave the room. They reminded him that God had not forgotten him and that God was with him. They put flesh on the promise of Jesus’ birth that God is with us.

We have done several funerals here in the past few weeks as some of our older members have passed away. Most of those funerals had many members of our church in attendance. Many of you volunteered to provide refreshments for the family. Many of you, including some of our staff, volunteered your time to run the computer or staff the sound system. Some of you sat with family members who had lost a loved one. In all those things you tell those family members, "You are not alone. Your loved one has passed and they are with Christ, but we are here with you. We are a sign to you that God is with you. We are Immanuel and here to remind you that God is present and you are not alone. We will stand by you and represent the presence of Christ in your life."

Do you see how powerful that is? We are called to incarnate the love of God in people's lives. This is what it means to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world for each other, especially in this season of Christmas.

This last year more than 200 of you went on mission trips. If you do the math then you know that you could write a check and pay local laborers to do the work that you do when you go on these mission trips and it would cost a whole lot less than you traveling to those places. So, why you go to Shiprock or Espanola, New Mexico? Why do you go to Pine Ridge, South Dakota? Why do you go to Kenya or Guatemala or Belize? Why not just send money?

You go because you incarnate the love of God. You go because you say to the children would've lost their parents to AIDS and have lost everything, "God has not forgotten you. We came to remind you of that."

Who do you know that needs to know that this Christmas? Maybe they have lost a loved one, or they haven’t had a job in months, or they have been divorced or they are walking through a dark place and you are Immanuel’s representative to them. That is part of the story of Christmas, to remind people that God is with them.

SLIDE       Joseph of Bethlehem (picture only)
Let's turn to Joseph for a minute. Joseph’s life is rather interesting, partly because we so little about it. How old was Joseph when he got married to Mary? We don’t know in the Scripture doesn't tell us. Protestants typically simply look at the Scriptures and say that we know that people got married when they were young and so Joseph was probably a young man of 14 or 15 years old. This is the Joseph that we have in our nativity scene at home. He has a full beard so he might not be 14 or 15, but he might be 17!

In the second century of the Christian faith, around 150 A.D., you find that Christians are starting to fill in the details which we don't find in the New Testament. They use their imagination when they begin to think about how old Joseph might be. Many people wanted to keep Mary very pristine in her image and the idea of Joseph having intimate relations with her was not an idea people wanted to ponder. People began to think of Joseph as an older man who was possibly a widower with children from a previous marriage, since Jesus had brothers and sisters that are mentioned in the Scriptures. He began to be seen more as a grandfatherly figure who is caring for a young girl who is pregnant.

By 150 A.D. people believed that Joseph was 93 years old when he married Mary, and he lived to be 111, until Jesus was 18 and then he died. This means that in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions you might find a Joseph that looks more like this one on the video screen.

**SLIDE**  
**Joseph Older (picture only)**

In this image you see an older gentleman who is tenderly caring for the Christ child. The truth is that we don't know how old Joseph really was. Today when you go home I encourage you to look at your nativity set and see if it is a Protestant nativity scene or a Catholic nativity scene. You could tell by how old Joseph is!

**SLIDE**  
**Joseph the Carpenter (picture only)**

The other thing we know about Joseph and that he was a *tekton*, which is the Greek word for Carpenter. You see in the video screen one my favorite paintings. This image is from George de la Tour and it shows a tender moment of Joseph teaching his son Jesus about carpentry. By the way, do you think this picture was Catholic or Protestant?

When I was in high school my dream was to be an architect and you might recognize that the Greek word *tekton* is found in that same word. The *archi* in
front of that means that you are over and above all of the folks who were working on the house. Just like in Archangel is one that oversees the other Angels and architect is one that oversees the other tektons. Joseph was simply a tekton.

In the first century they didn't build houses out of wood because the only wood would have been from olive trees in the holy land and you didn't build houses out of that. Instead, you would build houses out of stone but Joseph was in a stonemason so most likely he built the doors that went on homes. He may have built farm implements to be used in the fields and repaired them as well. He might have made some furniture, but most likely he made tools of some sort because that's the carpenter did in the first century.

My grandfather was a Carpenter and he taught me how to build things. I have several things in my home that he built. He built this little nightstand out of his mother's crib. This wood is almost 200 years old and it still works great. This little table that we use here in our sanctuary was made by my grandfather as well and it is almost 70 years old. Actually use some of his tools in my garage when I do some wood working or repair jobs around the house and it makes me feel closer to him. I was fortunate in that I knew my grandfather for almost 40 years because he lived to be 96. He was the kind of man who would stick with the job until it was done and he made sure it was done right. His word was his bond. When I think about Joseph I often think about my grandfather. He was salt of the earth and solid as a rock. That was the kind of man that God chose to be the earthly father Jesus.

It's interesting that Jesus never really talked about Joseph. We don't hear anything more about Joseph and the Gospels after Luke 3 when Jesus is about 12 years old. He doesn't appear anymore in the Gospels and he doesn't appear in the letters or in the book of Acts. We might however get a hint of the impact that Joseph have on the life of Jesus when we look at the spiritual life of Jesus.

Do you remember when Jesus prayed to God, what he called God? He called God, "Papa" or “Abba" or "Daddy." Do you think that tells us anything at all about Jesus and his relationship to his earthly father?

When Jesus was teaching the sinners and tax collectors he said to them, "God is like a father who had two sons. One of them goofed off and messed up and moved away from home and did stupid stuff. But when he came home, his father ran out to meet him and wrapped his arms around him and welcomed him
home." Do you think that story tells us anything about Joseph, as well as about God?

When the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, teach us how to pray." Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, "When you pray, pray like this: Our father, who art in heaven." Do you think Jesus learned all of these things in a vacuum or that God just placed it all in his head?

I think all of those situations tell us something about the relationship that Joseph had with Jesus and that Jesus had with Joseph. We see glimpses of how Joseph poured into his son's life and mentored to him and cared for him and taught him and discipled him and disciplined him, and painted a picture for him of the love of God.

**SLIDE**  
**Joseph the servant (picture only)**

One final thing you notice about Joseph in this story is that he doesn't even get any lines. Mary at least has a few things to say, but Joseph gets nothing. There are no prayers that are developed because of the words of Joseph like, "Hail Joseph, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Joseph doesn't get any that attention. Instead, Joseph is the patron saint of those who serve God quietly without anybody ever noticing.

If I am honest that I have to admit that inside of me there is this part of me that wants to be noticed when I do something good. I want people to recognize the way that I serve God or this other thing that I have done. I have to work hard against that thought to remind myself to do it secretly and not look for recognition. Jesus said, "When you do your works of righteousness, do them where no one else can see you except your Father who is in heaven." Who do you think Jesus learned that from? My guess is that he learned from Joseph.

When I look at Joseph I really want to be like him and yet there is this part of me inside which also wants to be noticed. When you put the hundred dollar bill in the offering plate you fold up so you can only see the one? Or do stretches out so that the people next you can see the entire bill? That sounds cheesy but that is the kind of war that we sometimes feel inside of ourselves.

I know that we feel that war and it is not just me because every once in a while I will get a letter from someone who is leading the church because they did this thing and that thing and this thing for the church and nobody recognized or said, "Thank you." I try to thank as many of you as I can when you play music or
when you serve as an usher or when I see you doing all the little things that it takes for us to be a church all week long. The reality is that there are hundreds of you who do great things around his church all week long and there is no way humanly possible for me to say "thank you" to each one of you. I feel badly that we are not able to do that because I know that some of us really need that.

I also know from Joseph that he had the greatest and most important job of any male on the face of this planet and he did it without recognition, without anybody praising him, without any lines in the New Testament and without any prayers dedicated to him. He did it because it was the right thing to do and because his Father asked him to do it.

Part of what we learn from Joseph is to humbly serve God without needing to be recognized. Maybe even we should go out of our way so that we are not recognized for what we do lest we begin to think about us and about God.

In this story of Christmas there is a contrast between Joseph and another man during the first century who we find in the story and that is King Herod. Herod ruled over the land for 33 years. He fashioned himself, King Herod the Great. He wanted to be the David who was expected to come. He wanted to be the Messiah and he wanted people to love him, but he wasn't from the lineage of David and he wasn't even Jewish. He was an Idumaean, former region south of the holy land. He was constantly trying to prove how great he was and he would construct these massive building projects all over the holy land. It's hard to imagine that people could even do these projects in the first century before Christ. He wanted the praises of people and the love of people. He wanted luxury and he wanted the world to revolve around him.

From Bethlehem you can look down the Hill and see something that looks like a volcano. It looks like a hill because it is so large but it actually is King Herod's palace where he was buried. King Herod decided to build a monument to himself to show the world how great he was. The tallest of the great pyramids in Giza is 350 feet and so he made sure that his monument with 400 feet. Herod built a 400 foot high mountain in honor of himself. It is 40 stories tall with lakes in the front of it and villas on the Lake so his friends and family can live around him. This monument is just down the hill from Bethlehem and everybody who lived there could see this amazing place. There was an empty theater in the front which seated 900 people, like his own in-home theater room. Here is a video of that palace.
This is a man-made mountain which Herod built as a monument to himself. You can see the pools and the fountains in the places that his friends could get out in boats on the water. This is the desert and so here you have the people of Bethlehem looking down and seeing this place created in the desert like an oasis. You can see the home theater which seated 900 people. Here is a view from the top where you can see the remains of this fabulous palace, complete with Roman baths, 40 stories in the air. Most likely stood at the top of this palace and thrust his arms in the air and said, "I am King of the Mountain. Everybody look at me! Look at what I have done!"

From here he could look over and see the little town of Bethlehem, where there was a Carpenter who worked with nothing but his hands and tools. He didn't look for any attention or for anyone to notice and he didn't get any lines. He simply said, "Here I am God. Use me."

This Christmas, which person do you want to be? Do you want to be the person who gets all the attention and says, "Please notice me"? Or do you want to be the person who says, "Oh God, I offer myself to you. I don't need recognition from anyone but you, to you be the glory."

As we begin to make that second prayer our prayer, we follow in the footsteps of Joseph. Would you pray with me?

I would like you to think right now as you are praying of one person that you know who needs to know Immanuel—who this season needs to know that somebody else cares and that God is with them. I would like for you to pray for that person right now. It might be someone who is out of work or someone who has lost a loved one or someone was going through a divorce or someone who is facing physical illness. You might something like this, "God, use me to bless them and encourage them." Pray for them by name right now...

Recognizing that there is a little bit of Herod in all of us, would you simply pray something like this:
God, please give me the heart of Joseph. Help me not to care if anybody notices how I serve. Help me to faithfully serve you, even when no one else is looking....

Oh God, help us as a church to embody your presence and your love to the community and to people around us—to people in other parts of the world and people next door. Help us to do our work not hoping that other people will notice, not wanting pray for ourselves, but simply to humbly serve you and to bring glory to your name. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.
“Joseph of Bethlehem”
Theme: The Journey From Nazareth to Bethlehem

Matthew 1:18-24

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. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. 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. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “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.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Meditation Moments for Monday, December 10 – Read Matthew 1:18-25 – The 2006 film The Nativity Story showed Mary washing Joseph’s feet as he slept, worn out from the strain of their trip to Bethlehem. To the unborn Jesus she said, “You will have a good and decent man to raise you.” That’s a fine summary of Matthew’s portrait of Joseph. He obeyed God, and nurtured and protected his bride (pregnant, but not by him) and her child.

• Matthew identifies the child three ways. It’s the story of the birth of “the Messiah [God’s anointed one], named “Jesus [Greek for “Joshua”—“God saves”] because he will save his people from their sins” and they will call him “Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’)” (verse 23). Which of these three ways of identifying Jesus speaks most deeply to your heart this Advent season?

• Luke 1:38 showed Mary saying, “I am the Lord’s servant…. May your word to me be fulfilled.” Matthew 1:24 says Joseph “did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.” What is God calling you to do or be this Advent season?

Tuesday, December 11 – Read 2 Matthew 1:18-20 and Deuteronomy 22:20-24 – In Israelite culture, a betrothal was as binding as marriage. Mary’s pregnancy led some (like Joseph at first) to the “obvious” belief that she had slept with some other man. Some must have condemned her (and Jesus as illegitimate—see John 8:41). It was even possible that she might be stoned to death (see John 8:3-5), as the law in Deuteronomy said.

• What would you have felt if you had been Joseph when Mary told you she was having a baby—but by the Holy Spirit, not another man? Whatever Joseph felt, Matthew says he “did not want to expose her to public disgrace.” What do you learn about Joseph’s inner qualities from his measured response (“he had in mind to divorce her quietly”)?

• The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels says Joseph was “a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father’s greatest privilege—siring his first-born son—in order to obey God’s will.” What cherished dream have you had to give up? How are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?
Wednesday, December 12 – Read Matthew 1:1-17 – The way Matthew started Jesus’ story feels strange, even boring to most of us. But family records were of critical importance in Jesus’ day. King Herod the Great, despised by most Jews because he was half Edomite, actually destroyed official registers so that no one else could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew said three significant things about Jesus. Jesus was the “Messiah,” the “son of David,” and the “son of Abraham.”

- The Hebrew word “Messiah” means “anointed one.” (“Christ” meant the same in Greek.) What do you believe made Jesus’ link to Abraham and King David so key for Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that God kept his ancient promises?

- In an unusual move for his time, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus’ genealogy. Scholar R. E. Brown suggests that Matthew chose the other four because, like Mary, God used each of them although they faced obstacles, even scandal, in their lives. Does God still work through unlikely people? What is God doing through you?

Thursday, December 13 – Read Genesis 37:1-11, 39:6-10, 41:39-43 – Joseph was named for a great man in Israel’s history. The first Joseph (of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat) was the patriarch Jacob’s favorite son. His story fills Genesis chapters 37-50. Known for his integrity and faithfulness, he eventually became first minister of Egypt. In that role, he saved Egypt (and Jacob’s family) from a great famine. And, like the later Joseph, he recognized God’s messages to him in dreams.

- In Bible times, parents usually chose names that captured the character they hoped and prayed their child would develop. What traits from his great namesake in the Hebrew past could a humble working man like Joseph emulate and live into?

- Do you bear a name associated with some admirable person, either in your own family or from history? If so, what qualities does that name suggest to you? What qualities is God working into your character through the challenges and opportunities you face in life? In what ways do you want your “name” to be remembered?

Friday, December 14 – Read Matthew 2:13-16, 19-21 – Joseph did far more than stand by the manger while the shepherds worshipped the baby. Matthew said Joseph kept Mary and baby Jesus safe from Herod’s murderous paranoia. Herod killed some of his own sons who were potential rivals for his throne. He certainly didn’t flinch from murdering boys in Bethlehem to try to wipe out the promised Messiah.

- The population of Alexandria, Egypt was probably about one-third Jewish. There were also other Jewish communities in Egypt. This made Egypt a safer refuge for Joseph, Mary and Jesus than it would be in today’s conditions. What people or places have given you safety or comfort in times of trouble in your life?

- God used dreams to guide Joseph. Many Christians believe it makes sense that God can communicate directly with our brains, without the need for sounds or visual cues. When have you sensed an “inner nudge” from God? Are you open to receive God’s direction, however it arrives?

Saturday, December 15 – Read Luke 2:41-52 – This is the last time we see Joseph in Jesus’ story. When Jesus began his public ministry, 18 years later, Joseph was apparently no longer living. Here he and Mary were worried parents. And we sense the unique challenge Joseph faced. Mary said “your father and I,” meaning Joseph. Jesus, while valuing and obeying (verse 51) Joseph, said being in the Temple meant being in his Father’s (God’s) house. And Luke says Joseph and Mary struggled to understand.

- Jesus taught, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy... everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 5:7, 7:24) How might we see the effect of merciful Joseph, a wise and careful carpenter, in Jesus’ teaching and life? Who has shaped your life for the better, through example and actions? Are there people who, given that chance, let you down and hurt you? Whose lives are you seeking to shape for the better?

Family Activity: Joseph was the name of Jesus’ earthly father. He was named for a great man in Israel’s history. Discuss the first, middle and last names of each person in your family. How was each person’s name chosen? What is the family history or connection, if any, behind each name? Explore the meaning of each name by looking on the website www.meaning-of-names.com. Discuss how each description “fits” each person. Do the meanings of any of the names challenge anyone to embody his/her description more fully? If so, how? Thank God for your name. Ask
God to help you live out and honor the positive meaning of your name. Thank God for Joseph and for his willingness to honor his name.