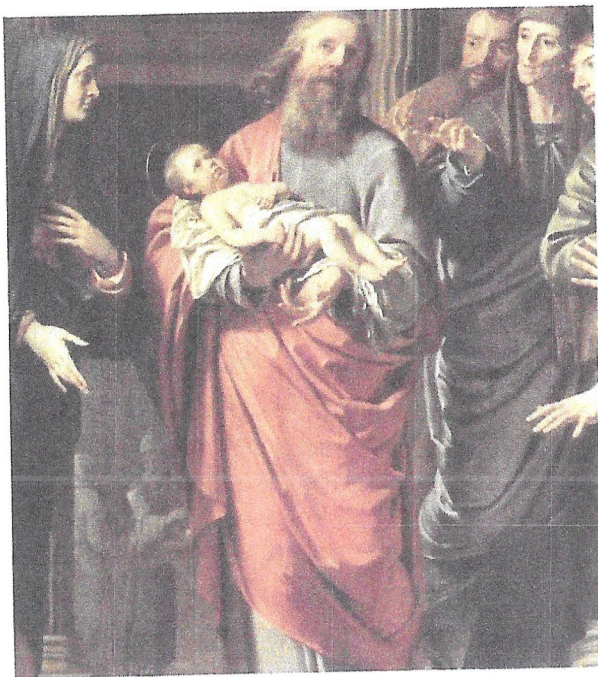


Matthew 1: 18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means, 'God with us.'" When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.



'Joseph'

On the night when Joseph thought about writing himself out of the Greatest Love Story Ever Told, the Holy One of Israel came to him in a dream, asking him to be a leading character of faith towards fulfilling God's plan of salvation for human beings. God speaks to Joseph, calms his fears and gives him instruction, and in the end, 'comes to the aid of Israel and all people according to their needs.'

In his reflection, 'Choosing to Stay', Rev. Wrencher commented: Matthew's gospel gives us the best look at Joseph in the story of Jesus' birth. Before Joseph and Mary get married, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. At this point in the story no one knows that Mary's pregnancy was by the Spirit of God. The town would have seen Mary and Joseph as unholy, disobedient, and driven by passion. Joseph is surely aware of this. He knows that he has not slept with Mary. She must have cheated on him, right? Custom required Joseph to publicly divorce Mary for cheating. To expose to the community her 'wickedness'. For Joseph, to not divorce her was to invite the harshest insults and embarrassment upon himself—and on Mary. To publicly divorce Mary would have meant Joseph's reputation could have been almost wiped clean. He would have even walked away with some money. Who wouldn't have stuck to law and order? Preserve your reputation, financial status, and the status quo. This is the way of revenge!

Yet, Joseph is declared righteous because he was 'unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, (and) planned to dismiss her quietly' (Matthew 1:19). Joseph seeks to save Mary from public punishment, shame, and humiliation, and thus preserve for her a future to be able to marry again and have a family. If Joseph is to be made the father of Jesus, Joseph must be a fitting reflection of the character of God. The virgin birth reveals that God refuses to abandon us. Joseph's quiet divorce is his refusal to abandon Mary and Jesus to be torn to pieces by society. To refuse to abandon is to show mercy. Through the story of this young, poor family, from an oppressed community, comes the

embodiment of mercy. The affirmation that God will restore us, shine God's face upon us, and save the world (psalm 80:7, 19).
(Sojourners, Dec. 2016, p. 49)

In Matthew's version of Jesus' birth story, Emmanuel means, God-With-us. Brian Wren glorifies this name for God in his prayer poem, 'Always You Are With Us.'

Holy God, Emmanuel always you are with us.
We are aware of you only because you have created us to know
you and enjoy you forever.

Covenant God, Emmanuel, always you are with us.
You entered human history, chose a particular people,
And walked with them in sorrow and joy.

Companion God, Emmanuel, always you are with us.
You are the God of Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses,
Deborah and David, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Joseph and Mary.

Humble God, Emmanuel, always you are with us.
Now as one of us, Jesus of Nazareth, born of a woman,
With a face, a name, and a story.

Word in flesh, Emmanuel, always you are with us.
We praise and adore you. Amen.
(from Advent, Christmas, epiphany p. 47)

In Joseph's story, the name Emmanuel means 'God-With-Us' and the name Jesus means, 'He Will Save'. Rev. Kate Huey notes: This unique gift of 'the God who saves' is Jesus, who is 'more than the accumulated best of his ancestors.' Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we watch and listen as Jesus reveals the hand of God at work in the world, undoing the damage that has been done by human sin, so this extraordinary birth 'is the beginning of the fulfillment of God's saving purposes. ... In Jesus, they could encounter God and experience God's saving grace, God's tender mercies, this gift of God's healing love. But we know that in Jesus we hear about God's expectations, too, even though we know they are beyond our capacity. Those

beautiful Beatitudes are hard to live up to, as are many of the teachings of Jesus. When we are afraid or feel we can never measure up to the demands of the gospel, we might ponder with Joseph the meaning of the name of Jesus, 'he will save' and remember that 'it's God who is acting here, not, we ourselves.' In our own efforts to be righteous 'there's One who helps us when we fall short. One who is always with us.

Joseph, son of David, was a devout, religious man. He trusted God, did what the prophets said to do, and faithfully obeyed the laws of Moses. In short, he was a good man, doing everything--- kosher. Imagine the depth of his wound when he heard that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Did he think that God was punishing him for knowingly or unknowingly breaking a Holy Command of God? Did he feel abandoned by God in his struggle to decide what to do? Confounded, was he angry and unwilling to prayerfully inquire of God's will? Knee deep in heart-break hurt, Joseph made his decision to divorce her privately. But because God is always with us with Love, the Holy Spirit came to Joseph in a dream when his ego defenses were down.

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, you are to name him Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1: 20b-21

If Joseph was to be the father of Jesus, he must be the embodiment of the saving love of Christ Jesus. In John 15:14 Jesus taught his disciples saying: Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life is his friends. Joseph, you remember, put Mary's well being before his own. Sacrificial in nature, it graced his being with the power of Christ's Love.

Prayer. Emmanuel, God-With-Us, whenever you need help reordering sinful human history, number us among your recruits in Jesus' saving name and in the way of his sacrificial Love. Amen.