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**The Fourth Sunday in Advent
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Come, Lord Jesus! As Immanuel

What are we to think of the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas? Some see him as no more than a great teacher, a wise philosopher, and an inspiration for brotherly love. The Bible presents him as much more: the child of Mary is the Son of God. He is IMMANUEL: God with us. Because Jesus is God with us, Christmas is worth celebrating.

**Sermon
Matthew 1:18-25**

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet 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 had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" ^w (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 did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Introduction – The older women noticed first and whispered what they suspected to the younger women. One day the whispers reached Joseph. At first he dismissed them as gossip but then he noticed, too. Mary was pregnant; that much was obvious. What wasn't obvious but what Joseph knew for sure was that he wasn't the father of this baby. This was a real jolt. It completely wrecked all their plans. They were doing what couples did back then: they weren't living in the same house but they had publicly consented to spend the rest of their lives together. In their society they were married. And now this. How was Joseph ever going to deal with this?

Joseph isn't a central character in the Christmas story. Mary and Jesus are always on center stage, obviously, and so are the angel and the angel choir and so are the sheep and the shepherds. Joseph is kind of in the background. But St. Matthew tells the Christmas story with Joseph as the central character. We heard that in today's Gospel. What Matthew tells us is how Joseph dealt with Mary's pregnancy and then with Jesus' birth.

So how does this story apply to us? This event shows us how a faithful believer dealt with the most unbelievable event in the history of humankind. Christmas is swirling all around us. These last seven days are crazy with activity. But in all the excitement and frenzy of Christmas, there is some value in taking a look at Joseph.

This Is How Joseph Dealt with Christmas

He learned the truth about his wife and her son
He took on his role as their husband and father

1. Joseph was in a tough situation. He never dreamed his marriage would end like this. You have to believe he was devastated and humiliated and probably even angry. He got down to business. Matthew tells us that Joseph was **faithful to the law** so he knew about the regulations God had set down for divorce. Matthew also tells us that **he didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace**. There must have been some love and respect left for Mary. He kept things under wraps and decided **to divorce her quietly**. The decision had been made.

Matthew tells us what happened next. **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."** The angel spoke to Joseph in a dream, not in a direct appearance as he did to Mary. But the information was just as dramatic and just as sensational. First: Joseph was to become the head of this family. Second: Mary hadn't been unfaithful to him; she was still a virgin. Third: the child in her womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Fourth: The child's name was to be Jesus or Jehoshua or Joshua which mean the Lord is our salvation. And last: this Jesus was the messiah God had promised to save the world from sin.

At a certain point Joseph woke up. He knew the dream was real; this wasn't fantasy. From now on he could deal with this pregnancy and this birth because he knew the truth about his wife and her son. And it's right here where we have something in common with Joseph. We need to know the truth about Mary and Jesus, too. We can't pass this by because we've heard it before. We can't really deal with Christmas without this truth in place. Jesus Christ is one-of-a-kind. No other person was like him before he was born and no others are like him since he was born. Unlike every other man born on earth except Adam, Jesus did not have a human father. Mary's virginity proved this. So the truth is that Jesus had a human mother and a divine father. Matthew reminds us that this was exactly what God promised. **All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").**

So this is how we deal with Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Immanuel—God with us—the child who is both a divine child and a human child. As a divine child he is unlike us; as a human child is just like us. And this boy had to be unlike us and like us at the same time or he could not take our place and save us. He was like us so that he was obligated to obey God's law as we were supposed to. He was unlike us so he could obey God's law perfectly in our place. He was like us so he could bleed and die as we were supposed to but he was unlike so that his blood and death could be the payment and the atonement for the sins of the world. The child born in Bethlehem could not be named Jesus, the Lord's salvation, he could not be the Savior without being both divine and human, God's Son and Mary's son, unlike us and like us. But Jesus is Immanuel—God with us—and he saved the world from sin. He saved us from sin too. And so we approach Christmas with confidence and faith and joy.

2. From everything we know about Joseph he was a faithful Old Testament believer. His kindness and concern to Mary are evidence of that. So Joseph knew the stories and the promises about the Messiah who was to come. He just never dreamed he was going to have a role in this until he dreamed that he would. So, **when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife**. His home was now her home, his table was now her table, and her son was his son. So this descendant of King David—the angel called son of David—this son of David became the legal father and the guardian and protector of the promised Son of David whose throne God intended to establish forever. And when he was born Joseph **gave him the name Jesus**, the Lord's salvation.

Joseph took his role seriously. He walked with a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem for the Roman census. He found a place in Bethlehem for shelter. He was there when the baby was born and probably held the new-born in his arms. He was likely the first one to see the shepherds as they walked from their hills and their sheep. He arranged to have Jesus circumcised eight days after his birth and he appeared in the temple a month and a half later to present the first-born child to the Lord. He secured a house for the little family; he was there to welcome the Magi when they arrived to present their gifts to the new-born King. He heard about Herod's plan to kill the children of Bethlehem and packed up Mary and Jesus and made the difficult trip to Egypt. He eventually went back Nazareth and there he watched his son Jesus **grow and become strong**. He could see that Jesus **was filled wisdom and that the grace of God was on him**. Jesus was on his way to becoming a man and becoming the Savior. When Joseph dealt with that first Christmas, he learned the truth about his wife and her son and then he took on his role as husband and father. When Jesus reaches 12, the Bible says nothing about Joseph again.

Joseph can be a model for us as we respond to the Christmas miracle. Joseph didn't question the truth he heard from the angel, even though it seemed absolutely impossible. And so we approach Christmas with the same unquestioning faith. We believe and confess that for us and for our salvation the Son of God came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human—God with us. And then, like Joseph, we take on the role the Lord has in mind for us, the role of husband or wife, of son or daughter, friend or companion, care giver or guardian, the role of praying, the role of giving, the role of witnessing. When we know the truth about Christmas, we take on the roll Christ as given us, as humble as it may be, and we do it with faith and love. Amen.