

December 18, 2022  
Fourth Sunday in Advent  
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH  
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 1:18-25 (Isaiah 7:10-17)

FROM UNBELEIF TO FAITH, JESUS SAVES HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR SINS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, the 1st chapter, which you heard read earlier.

When I was young, there was a key word that I always included on my Christmas wish list. **Surprises**. I want this and this – and I want some **surprises**. **Surprises** are the unexpected gifts that you have no idea are coming and just as the name suggests, you are genuinely **surprised** when you open the gift. It is getting a gift that you never asked for. No, not like getting socks and underwear. It is a wonderful and exciting gift that you did not even think of asking for.

Life is full of **surprises**. Sometimes the **surprises** are not so good. The **surprise** of a loved one passing away or news of someone losing a job. Other times **surprises** leave you with conflicted emotions – like an unplanned pregnancy. Even though God’s gift of life is a wonderful thing, circumstances surrounding a pregnancy can make for a stressful situation.

In our Gospel text, Joseph is stressed and conflicted because of Mary, his betrothed wife. According to Jewish custom, betrothal was a binding contract usually lasting for about one year where the betrothed girl was a legally the man’s wife, with the exception that they did not live together. And most especially – they did not have sexual relations.

Joseph was a righteous and loving man. He and others like him, both then and now, recognize that God has reserved the wedding bed for marriage. In Joseph’s mind, Mary was a faithful Jewish girl who would **also** wait for marriage. But sometimes, things are not as they appear. It appeared that Mary was **not** so righteous. Imagine Joseph’s **surprise** when Mary was found to be with child.

Of course, Joseph was no dummy. He knew that virgins do not get pregnant. Certainly Mary told him about the visit from the angel who told her that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit a child whom she was to name Jesus. (cf: Luke 1:26–33) Mary was excited to be a servant of the Lord. (cf: Luke 1:38) But who could believe a far-fetched story like Mary’s? Not Joseph. He is unbelieving.

It was not that he did not believe Isaiah’s prophecy about a virgin bearing a child, but he did not believe that the prophecy was coming true in Mary. (cf: Isaiah 7:14) The **surprise** pregnancy was all the evidence he needed to conclude that Mary had been unfaithful. He believed that he had three options:

1. He could keep Mary as His wife and endure a lifetime of public mocking for being the step-father of an illegitimate child.

2. According to Jewish Law, he could have Mary stoned to death for her sexual immorality. (cf: Deuteronomy 22:13–29)
3. But Joseph chooses a third option. Being a just and compassionate man, not wanting to make a bad situation worse for Mary, he plans to quietly divorce her.

For all the right reasons, Joseph was about to do the wrong thing, so God intervenes. The only way for sinful humans to know the ways of God for salvation is for God to reveal His salvation in Jesus to us. As Joseph considers his decision, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream saying:

***“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*** (Matthew 1:20–21)

So begins the Incarnation, the doctrine of God taking on the flesh of man, becoming the divine God-man who enters His creation to save mankind from their sins. Equipped with new information, **now** what is Joseph to do? Should he trust what his eyes see – or – by what his ears hear? What he sees seems rational. He sees that his wife has cheated on him and he has every right to divorce her. But what he hears is the angel addressing him as Joseph, son of David, speaking of King David, to whom God promised a descendent which would be the Messiah. (cf: Matthew 1:20; 2 Samuel 7:12-16) Joseph hears God’s word that in taking Mary as his wife, he will be the legal father, the adoptive step-father, of the unborn Child – except – the choice of the Child’s name is not left to Joseph. God the Father Himself names His Son with the name which is descriptive of the divine character of the work for which He became incarnate. His name is Jesus, which means **“Yahweh saves.”** (ANLEX, 203)

Many times, things are not as they appear to the eye. The only way for sinful humans to know the ways of God for salvation is for God to reveal His salvation in Jesus to us. The people of God walk by faith – not by sight – and that God given faith comes by hearing the Word of God. (cf: Romans 10:17; 2 Corinthians 5:7)

Joseph could have been vindictive like so many spouses are today. He could have told family and friends what he perceived was the ugly truth, that his wife had cheated with another man and was pregnant with his child, and put her to public shame. Yet, even though he may not have fully understood, by faith, he was obedient to the Angel of the Lord, taking Mary as his wife. As husband, he was committed as guardian, protector, and provider of both Mary and the Christ Child.

Joseph is an example that all husbands and fathers should follow. St Paul writes:

***“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church...”*** (Ephesians 5:25)

How has Christ loved the Church? Unconditionally! Jesus’ unconditional love forgives sins – no questions asked. Christ shows His unconditional love for you in that while you were still a sinner, He died for you. (cf: Romans 5:8)

Your heavenly Father has given you a Christmas **surprise**. It is the most wonderful and priceless gift that you never asked for. Even though you were dead in your trespasses and sins, God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loves you, revealed His salvation in Christ Jesus to you. In Baptism or in the hearing of the Gospel, He made you alive in Christ and saved you by His grace. (cf: Ephesians 2:1–5) He adopted you into the body of His Church. He

has given you forgiveness of sins for sake of Jesus, who was born of the virgin Mary so that He could suffer and die to pay the wages of all your sins, reconciling you with the Father.

Joseph thought Mary had been unfaithful and in his unbelief he was going to quietly divorce and abandon her. When you have committed unfaithful and shameful acts, Jesus could have abandoned you. Abandonment is what you deserve. You are supposed to be faithful to Him alone. Yet you and I whore after every false idol that twinkles in our eyes. You and I deserve the wrath of God's eternal judgement. He could have left us drowning in our sins and would have been justified in doing so. But instead, He had compassion on you. Instead of what you deserve, *surprise!* God gave you a Savior.

**“... when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of [a virgin], born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem [sinners such as you and me] ... so that we might receive adoption as sons.”** (Galatians 4:4–5)

God the Son left the glory of heaven to be with you. He was born in a barn and endured every humiliation possible in this broken and sinful world, subjecting Himself to the life of sinful man, even though He without sin. (2 Corinthians 5:21) He fulfilled every bit of prophesy and kept God's Law perfectly. (cf: Matthew 5:17) He publicly endured the shame you deserved, dying the most grisly and gruesome death that was rightfully yours – all so you would be saved from death and disgrace – and to forgive you of all your sins of committing shameful acts, hurting and abandoning others, and whoring after false idols.

While Jesus has ascended into heaven, He still comes to be with you right here in the Divine Service by means of His Word and Sacrament, forgiving your sins, creating and sustaining faith in you as He reveals Himself to you as your Lord and Savior. By the power of the Holy Spirit given you in Baptism, His unconditional love for you enables you to love and forgive those who have hurt you and deserted you. I am not just talking about husbands and wives. I am talking about forgiving the trespasses of those who trespass against you like you pray in the Lord's Prayer: family, friends, neighbors, and all who sin against you. Why should you forgive them? Because God, in Christ, has forgiven you.

Joseph's story is your story. It begins with unbelief and ends in faith. Your heavenly Father has given you a Christmas *surprise*. It is the most wonderful and priceless gift that you never asked for. His name is Jesus:

**“... for He... [saves] his people from their sins...”** (Matthew 1:21)

... and you are His own child, adopted in Baptism and grafted into His heavenly kingdom, here in time, and there with Him, one day, eternally in heaven.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,  
Amen.