

Where do you come into the picture?

## Joseph: Believing in an Unreal Promise

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne

Advent 1

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### From Isaiah 40 (The Message)

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Get you up to a high mountain. Lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, do not fear; and say, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, his reward is with him ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them close by, and gently lead us.*

**Reflection:** "See the Lord comes." I said, "See the Lord comes." OK, I guess you didn't really expect much there did you? These are the words of a prophet from some 2500 years ago announcing the coming of God. Those words have lost a bit of their urgency with all the years. Is God still coming? Has he come already and you missed it? Will he come at all? Do Christians believe anymore that God is about to arrive, or is it all that kind of talk a bit too religious, almost mythic, in nature? I mean, does anyone truly expect the Lord to come today?

There's a story told about a lawyer who cleverly summed up his defense of a man on trial for murder. The biggest problem in the case was the body of the deceased had never been found. So the lawyer made only this comment, "I have very little to say in my client's defense. That's because I do not have to. One minute from now, the man he is alleged to have murdered will walk through the back door of this courtroom and you will see for yourself that my client is innocent of murdering him." With that the lawyer turned and looked at the back door, and stood waiting. Every eye in the courtroom turned to the back door as well. When the minute had passed, the lawyer turned back to the jury and said, "The simple fact that you all looked at the back door expecting the man to enter shows that you have more than a reasonable doubt about my client's guilt. You have no choice but to return a verdict of not guilty." Well, it was a masterful defense, and the jury was only out of the room five minutes before they returned. So it was very surprising to the lawyer when the jury said, "Guilty." The lawyer couldn't believe it. He yelled out, "But you each had reasonable doubt!" The Foreman of the Jury said, "Yes we did, but we also noticed that everyone in the courtroom had turned to look at the back door except your client. Evidently he was not expecting the deceased to return."

Well, a lot of Christians aren't all that convinced the Lord is coming back either. (Kind of wish you'd looked at the back door a minute ago don't you?) Only it's one of the longest held beliefs in the Christian Church that Christ will come again, and each of you will meet him, face to face, one at a time. What do you think that will be like? What will you say to Jesus then? Will

you be afraid of Jesus or overly confident or something in between? I suppose the best thing you could be is ... prepared.

When you get past the decorating and the shopping, you can use this season of preparation before Christmas as a time to also get ready to meet Jesus ... Of course you really don't have to prepare for something that's already happened. There's not much need anymore to get ready for Y2K or the Spanish Inquisition. Those things have already happened. They're over and done with. In the same way you don't need to get ready to meet the baby Jesus in the manger. He's already been there and done that. Folks, it's time now to get ready to meet Jesus when he will come again. But to do that I don't mind at all looking back and learning from the experience of those who prepared themselves to meet him the first time around. That's why for the next few weeks we'll look at the manger scene and ask what it is that Joseph and Mary and the Wise Men and Shepherds can teach us about meeting Jesus for ourselves.

And so we start this morning we begin with the announcement that Jesus has come, that Jesus will come again, and that in the mean time, Jesus comes to meet us in this place, as he has promised, especially when we gather in his name and call upon him in prayer. That's also something for which I want to be ready ... day by day, I want to do is be closer to him than I was before, like last week, last month. If you want to be closer to him as well, then I invite you to stand and join me, for in our worship it is true, our Lord comes here today.

### From the Gospel of Matthew 1:18-24 (NLT)

*Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiance, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace her publicly. As he considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been 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 happened to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded.*

## Solo: A strange way to save the world

Recorded by 4 Him

*I'm sure he must have been surprised  
at where this road had taken him  
'Cause never in a million lives  
would he have dreamed of Bethlehem  
And standing at the manger he saw with his own eyes  
The message from the angel come to life ...  
And Joseph said  
Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade  
Why him, with all the rulers in the world  
Why here, in this stable filled with hay  
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl  
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say  
But this is such a strange way to save the world  
To think of how it could have been  
if Jesus had come as he deserved  
There would have been no Bethlehem,  
no lowly shepherds at his birth  
But Joseph knew the reason love had to reach so far  
And as he held the Savior in his arms ...  
he must have thought  
Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade  
Why him, with all the rulers in the world  
Why here, in this stable filled with hay  
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl  
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say  
But this is such a strange way to save the world*

**Message:** With Thanksgiving over it's time to turn our attention to Christmas. There's decorations and shopping to do, but I'm not yet really in the mood this year. How about you? With finances so tight, shopping seems less exciting. Maybe this year it will be a good time to get back to the original Christmas story for some inspiration, right? But then what do you see? I'll grant you that the whole Christmas story, seen from a scientific, sceptical, and sophisticated perspective, sounds strange. That's lead some very modern Christian leaders to sniff at the yokels who might actually still believe in such things as wise men and stars, in angels singing and virgin mothers. One of those very smart church leaders wrote in his popular book the only people who still believe in the manger story are children who don't know any better and the people over at Hallmark who make their living selling Christmas cards. Well, I can't speak for the Hallmark people but I'm willing to accept the Christmas story even if those smart people say I'm just being a child. I'm actually happy to be considered a child of God, and so, to share the same father with that child in the manger.

Just so there's no confusion here, I want you to know that I'm willing to accept that this story of Christmas is historically true, though I am also willing to say it is a very strange story and hard to believe. You know, that's the whole point. At Christmas, God enters into time and space to do things that we could not do for ourselves. Let me say that again ... At Christmas, God enters into time and space to do things that we humans could not do for ourselves. That's the point of the story. It's a miracle, because it's a miracle we need to get out of the mess we've

made for ourselves ... and continue to make. So it's no wonder there's a lot of wonder involved. How could it be any different and still be true?

That's why we're starting by looking at Joseph today. Of all the people in the story, I feel most like him. He's caught in the middle of something he doesn't exactly understand. Things are not in his control. At one time he thought they were. But he learned that God was in control, not him. That's a lesson I have learned many times, because then many more times I've forgotten it again and tried to live as if I were actually in control of my life. I need help remembering God is in control and, ... that's not a bad thing, even if it's hard to understand.

So here's Joseph. From what we know in the Bible (and there's a lot of other stories about Joseph and Mary and little drummer boys and the like that have grown up around the Christmas Story, but we're going to stick to the Bible's story here), well from what we know in the Bible, Joseph was a good man, perhaps much older than Mary, who, after all, is referred to as a young girl. The good in Joseph appears as the story unfolds. Joseph is engaged but Mary is found to be pregnant. Back then that was a big problem. Mary had committed a crime for which the penalty could have been death, not that I'm advocating that, just mentioning it. Joseph must have liked Mary, for instead of getting angry and demanding punishment, he decided to end the engagement quietly.

That took courage. I might ask how you would have acted in that situation, but I don't have to. You've had to face the same kinds of things in your life. I mean, how often have you been in a situation where you had every right to demand satisfaction, where you were within your rights to demand someone else back off, back down or give something back? How often have you wanted payback for what another person has done to you or said about you? You may say, "I only want what's fair" or "I'm only asking for what I've got coming to me." It seems only natural to want, like telling off someone with a shopping cart full of things who is trying to get in line in front of you in the 10 items or less line. But you know what ... it seems to me that we live in a culture more devoted to demanding our rights than in thinking about others. Let's get personal for a moment: how often do you look beyond your own rights, and do what's right for someone else? That's what Joseph did. Instead of demanding his rights, he thought of Mary. He looked out for her needs. That took a big step. But, it was not nearly as big a leap of faith as Joseph's next step would be.

Here's where the story takes an unbelievable twist. Joseph gets the whole thing explained to him next in a dream. The explanation is farfetched, to say the least. We've all heard the Christmas story so often it comes as no great shock to hear it again. Imagine trying to explain all this to someone in a far off country

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who has never heard the story before. An angel speaks in a dream, the mom is pregnant from the Holy Spirit, the baby to be born will be fulfillment of the prophet's words that God is coming into the world ... and this child will save everyone from their sins. OK, that's a lot to take in all at once. You do Joseph a huge disservice if you think he woke up and without any doubts, said something very Bible-like, like, "*Verily, verily, Lord thou hast spoken and I thy servant shall now jumpeth to it.*"

Please understand, the first step of faith Joseph took was hard enough. Joseph did not demand his rights, he looked out for Mary. That was nice. But it only hurt a bit. He kept his integrity intact, he might even be said to come out looking a bit noble. But then, there was this next bit. Here God was asking Joseph to do something far bigger. Joseph would now endure months of people snickering at him behind his back. With his integrity gone, he'd be seen either as a fool who let his fiancée get pregnant, or people would think the child was his, and the reason he wasn't doing anything was he had jumped the gun, and had not been able to wait for the wedding night. Either way Joseph ends up being the big joke in town. Yet all the while, Joseph has to hold onto a belief that things are not what they seem, that this is all part of God's plans, no matter how unrealistic any of it sounds.

Joseph was being asked to believe something that was not possible. His willingness to follow through, to act on what God had promised before it happened, illustrates a deeper kind of faith. It's the next step for anyone of us who wants to come closer to God. It's also the step you and I need to take if we want to come closer to who God wants us to be.

In his excellent book *Chasing Daylight*, Erwin McManus describes these two kinds of faith as first-dimension and second-dimension faith. "*First dimension faith calls us to live [faithfully] in the concrete realities of life ... it means taking responsibility for the good we know to do. It's about treating even the small tasks before us as important and worth our best effort.*" Well that's exactly what Joseph started out doing. He treated Mary better than she deserved. He used the situation he was in to be merciful. It was plain to him he should be kind, as God in turn had been kind to him. Perhaps he prayed for guidance, perhaps he asked God for patience. What we know is Joseph acted on his faith in a considerate way. That's the first step of faith, the first, but not the last.

McManus writes: "*Yet while first-dimension faith sees realities in the realm of possibilities, second-dimension faith sees realities in the realm of impossibilities. In first-dimension faith the context for miracles is internal. God is working in us and through us. In second-dimension faith the context is often external. God's hand is clearly working around us.*" That's where Joseph ends up. God gives him the choice to just divorce Mary quietly and go on with his life, or to care for Mary and go along with God's bigger plan to save the world. Even if the plan sounds impossible. Even if there's no way to see where it will all lead.

Here's where Joseph becomes a hero to me. He didn't just stick with being faithful in the small things. He took the next step and became faithful in the impossible. He trusted God not just to

help him accept the situation he was in, but he trusted God to change the situation itself. That's such a big step; I don't always take it. I wonder how many of you ever think about taking it.

Oh sure you can see faith at work when you ask for patience and God helps you make it through a tough situation. You were off to see family, and there's a person in your family who's always a real jerk. You pray for help, and ask God to help you be patient enough to live through the family reunion. Or you have a big presentation at work for a boss who expects too much and compliments your efforts way too little. So you ask God to help you make it through the situation. That takes faith. But not so much. It's a starting point, but not where faith leads you. In fact, if all you're asking for is God to help you or guide you or give you patience, you are simply asking for far too little. What ... do you think that's all God can do for you? Is it hard to expect anything more from God than a bit of help making it through the day? Only ... "*When we play it safe,*" McManus says, "*we squeeze God out of the formula. If we only go where we know and do what we're certain will succeed, we remove our need for God. To follow Jesus is to enter the unknown, to relinquish security, and to exchange certainty for confidence in him.*"

That sounds odd, because for many people, faith in God is supposed to offer a sense of security. Faith gives you safety, a feeling that God is there to protect you. Only God is not looking for people who play it safe, he's looking for people who will go all out for him, and with him. That's really where faith comes into play. McManus writes, "*Whenever we respond to God's invitation, our need for God becomes heightened. That's what happens with first-dimension faith. But whenever we take on a God-sized challenge, for instance when we move onto the next kind of faith, self-sufficiency is no longer an option.*" We have to learn how to trust everything we are and all we do, to God. So ... I need to remember that he's in control, not me.

So first-dimension faith means simply asking God to give you the patience to deal with your family members at your next reunion. That's a good thing. It's something you figure God will be in favor of. God's not going to turn down a request for patience, is he? But that's simply far too safe a request. It doesn't involve much faith to ask ... The deeper kind of faith Joseph shows us, means asking God to do the impossible. It starts when you ask God to help bring your family closer together, to heal old wounds, to help each person involved have a change of heart that changes everything. Maybe it's your brother or sister who needs to make big changes, maybe it's you, or more likely, it's both of you. So you ask God to make something much bigger happen, something only he could make happen. That takes a lot of faith to ask ... So maybe you need to pray less about having the strength to make it through your next encounter with your boss, and instead, you need to start praying for your boss to experience the joy that comes from knowing God in his life. That might take a miracle, but do you believe God can or can not work miracles? So, it's also time to have the faith to pray for your teenager to become a person of great character, and for you to become a parent that truly loves and respects them ... and not just pray for the grace not to kill them this week. It's time to ask God for miracles.

That's Joseph's faith. He trusts God can do the impossible. But he not only trusts God, he anticipates God's actions. That means Joseph started to look for signs of how God was going to keep his word. He became an expectant father ... in more than the ordinary ways. I challenge you also to start to live in anticipation. You have been told "See, your Lord is coming." I live in expectation of meeting Jesus some day. Maybe it's today. Maybe it's not for years to come. No matter. I want to live each day expecting to meet Jesus. As I do, that expectation changes my perspectives, and my choices. I mean, what do you expect to happen today? If you are not expecting a miracle, then don't be surprised if you don't see any. If you're not expecting to see God at work in the world around you, you simply won't. Joseph teaches me to live in expectation of the big things God will do when you believe.

But wait, that's not all. Along with not playing it safe, along with

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**What story will you make possible this week?**

asking for God to intervene in this world to solve the real problems you and I face, along with anticipating that God will act in some way, I need to take one more step forward in faith. Joseph took a lot of steps forward. He took care of Mary during her pregnancy. He took care of her even on that long trip

from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem because the Roman authorities required everyone to go to their hometowns for the census. Joseph did what he needed to do. He didn't just ask, he didn't just wait in anticipation for God to do something big, Joseph acted as if God was about to act any moment.

Imagine if you acted like that this week. What if you looked at the biggest issues in your life right now. You could ask for God to help you handle them better, to have more patience and strength and wisdom and courage. You could ask for a greater

sense of peace in the midst of everything. And that would be a fine thing to do, as a first step, but not as the only step you take to come back to God. What if you not only asked for God's Spirit to enter into your family relationships and make big changes, what if you not only started looking for what God might be doing in your family, what if you started to act on your faith even before God had shown you all he was doing? What if you acted on your prayer for peace in your family by treating others better, by forgiving the slights or the backhanded compliments and looking for where God may be working to change the whole situation? What if you acted on your prayers instead of waiting just for God to act? It would make a difference.

Perhaps the biggest difference would be in what you will be able to accomplish in your life. Joseph's faith made the Christmas story possible. He was willing to let God's plans unfold though his actions. You know, Mary wasn't going to get to Bethlehem all by herself, folks ... Joseph is a real part of the story. So too, you can be a major factor in making a difference in other people's lives when you let God use you for his purposes. You may not understand how God will use you. You don't have to. You may have a hard time seeing the big picture and where you fit into it. You don't need to do that either. What you need is the kind of faith Joseph had, a faith that knows God is in control and wants to be where he is at work. That's the kind of faith that says, "Lord, I do not know exactly what you have in mind or how you will accomplish your task through me, but I am yours. I am ready. Have your way in me Lord, have your way." Can you say that? I expect you can ...

#### **Hymn: Have thine own way**

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!*

*Thou art the potter, I am the clay.*

*Mold me and make me after thy will,*

*While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

*Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!*

*Wounded and weary, help me I pray*

*Power, all power, surely is thine,*

*Touch me and heal me, Savior divine*