

Matthew 1:18–25: ¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

By Grace You Hear, Believe and Do.

INTRODUCTION

During the Season of Advent we prepare for the coming of Christ, coming to us first in a stable in Bethlehem, then coming into our hearts through the Word of God, and one day, coming to us as King of kings and Lord of lords on Judgment Day.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent usually focuses on something about the Mother of Our Lord, Mary. In reality, though, the Fourth Sunday in Advent focuses on the virgin conception of Christ.

On this particular Fourth Sunday in Advent, we see the troubles that this virgin conception caused for Joseph—if Joseph goes through with his plans to divorce Mary, then God’s plan goes off the tracks. But God is working miracles here. He is relentlessly preparing the world for the birth of His Son by giving Joseph the grace of hearing ears, a believing heart, and a faith active in doing what God commands.

Our Gospel reading finds Joseph with a dilemma. At the time of Joseph and Mary,

betrothal—or engagement as we would call it today, was part of the marriage contract. If you were betrothed, it was as legally binding as marriage. Yet the relationship was not to be consummated until the public wedding ceremony. Thus, if the engaged woman became pregnant, it was a sign of adultery.

If this happened in the Old Testament days, the woman could have been stoned under the Mosaic Law. Under the Roman government, capital punishment was outlawed, except, of course, for the Roman government—it could put people to death, but the Jews could not. So, if a woman was found to be pregnant during her engagement, the husband would divorce her rather noisily— if you get what I mean—so as to protect his own reputation.

Now, we don't know how Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy, but Matthew says that Joseph was intent on divorcing her. She was pregnant, but it wasn't his child. However, rather than making a big show of the divorce, and thus doing great harm to Mary's public image, Joseph resolved to divorce her quietly. But while He was thinking about this, God sent an angel to Joseph. And as I've said before, angels have the best job in the Bible!

The angel said to Joseph: “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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Faithful Hebrews like Joseph had been waiting for centuries for this moment. God had promised that the seed of the woman would crush the head of satan. He had promised that a virgin would give birth to “Immanuel, which means, ‘God with us.’”

Imagine, though, if Joseph didn't believe what his ears heard or his eyes saw. He could have simply dismissed the angel as some kind of hallucination. Or he could have scoffed at the angel—told him how unbelievable his story was—and went through with the divorce.

But Joseph listened to the angel and he believed the angel. Matthew says that Matthew was a just man—that means he was a man of faith. Like Abraham, he trusted the promises of God. Faith and trust in God’s promises is a gift of God’s grace—it is a work of the Holy Spirit.

About the miracle of faith, Paul writes to the Galatians: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? (Gal. 3:5–5). The miracle of faith is that God gives you ears to hear his Word and a heart to believe His promises.

So, by God’s grace, both Joseph and Mary believed what they heard from the angel. Mary would conceive and give birth to the Son of God—and Joseph, “you shall call His name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

In their hearing came faith and in their faith came the doing. Mary graciously accepted her role as the Mother of Christ; and Joseph his role as the provider and protector of the Christ-child. Matthew writes: “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

Joseph not only believed the angel, he did as the angel said. He took Mary as his wife and named her child, Jesus. Now, he could have simply believed the angel but then thought, “What will the world think of me if I marry this woman who is pregnant with a child not my own?” Or, he could have thought, “Do I really want this burden, after all this isn’t my kid.”

By God’s grace, not only did Joseph hear God and believe God, he did as God commanded.

This is the obedience of faith that the apostle Paul speaks of in our Epistle reading from

Romans: “through whom (that is, God the Father) we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...”

As you see from Joseph, trust in God’s promise and the doing what God commands go hand in hand. This is similar to what John the Baptist proclaimed: “Do works in keeping with repentance.” Repentance is a faith thing—only believers acknowledge their sins and trust that God forgives them for the sake of Jesus. And from this repentance and faith automatically flow good works. And those works are works of love—love for God and love for your neighbor. And it’s the Ten Commandments that teach what God considers a good work.

We Lutherans acknowledge that good works don’t save us from our sins. The works of Jesus; that is, His life and His death on the cross do that. Good works are the result or fruit of our faith in Jesus—they are done in response to God’s love, grace and mercy in Christ. Thus, the good works that we do are the obedience that comes from faith.

The obedience that comes from faith is a gift of your Holy Baptism. In John chapter 15, Jesus told His disciples: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” By God’s grace you have been grafted onto Christ by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. Jesus now works through you just as He did Joseph. And Jesus makes it very clear that unless good works are done through Him they are not good works.

You may think that people do good works all the time—helping their neighbors, giving to charity, serving as volunteers in schools and hospital. But not all good works are good in God’s sight. We call “good works” done by the unrighteous, civil righteousness. Such good works may make the doer of them look righteous in the civil realm, but all their “good works” are tainted by

sin, because they are done apart from Christ. That means they are not good works in God's sight because they are not done in the obedience that comes from faith in Jesus.

The problem for believers, though, is that we're not always obedient. Both Mary and Joseph were sinners and certainly needed Jesus as their Lord and Savior, too. There are times when we keep our faith in Jesus secret so we won't suffer embarrassment or conflict with other people. There are teachings in God's Word that we don't like and rebel against. Every time we sin, we are being disobedient to our heavenly Father. We may hear Him and believe Him, but we don't do what He commands. That's sin and to sin, then, is an act of unbelief.

When the disciples had difficulty casting a demon from a young man, Jesus rebuke them by saying, "'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?" The father of the child fell down before Jesus and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9).

That's our life in Christ in this fallen world, "I believe. Help my unbelief." We hear God's Word, we believe in Jesus, but we often don't do what God commands. As I said earlier, perhaps it's because we want to avoid criticism or conflict, so we don't do as God commands. Perhaps we put other things before God—give sleeping in a priority over worship, or buying nice Christmas presents a priority over giving to the Lord's work, or disobey parents because we put friendships ahead of family.

Sometimes we have a hard time doing what God commands because it seems like God's ways are strange to us, or we find ourselves wondering how He is working through the things He asks us to do.

Whatever it is, that's our sinful nature at work. Like Peter, we say we'll fight and die for Jesus—and then deny Him when the pressure is on.

But God is gracious. It is the Holy Spirit who gives you ears to hear, and heart to believe and the power to do what God commands. And one of God's most important commands is to repent. And so the Holy Spirit gives you the power to repent—to acknowledge your sins before God. You see, Jesus didn't come to save the perfectly righteous, He came to save sinners. And when just one sinner repents, Jesus teaches us in Luke 15 that all heaven rejoices.

Conclusion

When we look at Joseph's life, we may say, "There was a good man." Then, when we look at our lives, we may wonder if we've done enough, if we measure up. There was a man who was a member of this congregation who was dying. This was his answer when I asked him if he was ready for heaven, "I hope I've done enough to get in." I told him, "I have good news for you—you have done enough because Jesus has done everything you need to go to heaven—and He's given it to you as a gift of His grace through your faith. He lived for you, He died for you—He's done it all for you."

By God's grace you can be certain that, as believers in Jesus, you have the obedience that comes from faith. In this life our hearing won't be perfect, our believing won't be perfect and our obedience won't be perfect. But God gives us the gift of forgiveness. That's really what Christmas is all about—God giving us the gift of His Son, who was obedient for us all the way to the cross!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.