

In the same way that **John the Baptist** was the central character of the story last Sunday, I began to prepare this sermon thinking the central character in this story is **the Angel of the Lord** who appeared to Joseph in a dream. That’s perhaps because Joseph curiously never speaks—not in this story or anywhere in the Bible! In Luke’s more extended Christmas narrative Joseph never utters a word. Joseph, Mary’s *husband* [we’ll get to that in a moment] was “*faithful to the law*” as verse 19 says, or as other translations say, was “*a righteous man*.” **A righteous person lets his or her actions do the talking. A righteous person is the opposite of someone who is “all talk, no action.”** Joseph in Matthew 1 acts boldly and swiftly in response to the messages he receives from God through the angel, even when those messages are counter-intuitive and difficult. Joseph’s decision to stick with Mary was probably not seen by his friends as a smart move. People no doubt talked behind his back. **But a righteous man, faithful to the law, need not say much.** His actions say it all!

We don’t know much about Joseph, but what we do know is impressive. Even though Joseph doesn’t utter a word, we’re given a number of positive characteristics to understand what kind of person he is. **Joseph is righteous. He also is not one to bear a grudge.** Look at the way he decides not to publicly disgrace Mary when he finds out his fiancé is pregnant. And, when God’s messenger **appears** to him in a dream, he does what God **commands**.

Yet his obedience is going to look very strange to the people around him. Like they judged Mary, they will judge Joseph. And if we put ourselves in Joseph’s shoes, would we make the same choice to be obedient to God’s messenger? This passage tells us that Mary was “*pledged*” to Joseph, that is, “*betrothed*” and that they had not consummated their marriage. To understand this, we need to know that in Jewish marriage there were three steps. **The first step** was the *engagement*, a contract arranged by family members who determined whether the couple would be well suited for each other and for a future marriage. **The second step** was the *betrothal* the public ratification of the engagement with a

period of one year for the couple to become known as belonging to each other. The only way a betrothal could be terminated was by a divorce. In Jewish law there is a phrase which states that a young woman whose fiancé dies during the period of betrothal is “a widow.” Mary and Joseph were in the second stage of marriage in Matthew’s account. **The third step** is the *marriage* proper which took place at the end of the year of betrothal.

Revealed clearly in this passage is Joseph’s example of human cooperation with the Lord, like that of Mary which she puts to song in the Magnificat. Just as Mary’s story is exceedingly full of challenges to her faith and trust, Joseph’s story of joining God by supporting Mary is also an enormous challenge. In some ways, it lacks the glamour of being the one to “bear God” into the world. But there’s an added layer of trust needed. He shows implicit trust in God who sends him this message when in verse 24 we read: *“He did what the Angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.”*

Just try to imagine how important Joseph’s cooperation with God really is! It is through Joseph’s family line that Jesus is part of the line of David. As Jesus’ adoptive dad, the ancient prophecy is fulfilled. In a story full of miracles and challenging circumstances, this adoption detail is an easy one to miss. God’s redemptive work happens *through* Joseph, but also *through* the Angel of the Lord’s **appearing** in verse 20 and **commanding** in verse 24. Luke’s Gospel names the messenger God sent to Mary in chapter 2 verse 26, where we read, *“God sent the Angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.”* In Joseph’s case, he could easily have ignored the angel’s command. But a DNA test would not be the thing that binds him to his betrothed. Joseph’s trust and commitment is what bound him to his pregnant wife and to the angel’s **command**.

Joseph sets aside any rights he has and instead identifies with and walks alongside the woman who needs his support to pursue the will of God in her life. Joseph does this even though it may cost him. He’s willing to withstand the challenges his commitment will bring, and he does so by relying on his

quiet faith. Joseph proves himself to be exceedingly gentle and humble—just as we know his adopted son Jesus will be. Advent is a perfect time to think about our own cooperation with God, and what will we do, if an angel appears to us in a dream. What part of God’s kingdom might come or will be done through our own willingness to do what the Holy Spirit speaks to us?

Names are also central to what happens here in Matthew 1. Because his own last name trips up many a person who tries to pronounce it, Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner (spelled B-U-E-C-H-N-E-R) once asked, “What is it about our names and how we identify with them?” Buechner expects his name to be mispronounced by maitre’d’s or telemarketers, or even sometimes by the person introducing him as a guest speaker. That happens. But why is it that when it happens, the person whose name is mispronounced ends up being the one to feel embarrassed? Buechner says “I’ve never seen the person doing the mispronouncing blush, but sometimes I do because I feel foolish for being addressed incorrectly in public.”

**A strange business, our names and how we identify with them.** It probably tells us that names are very important but also that eventually we begin to identify with our own names at some point in life. We get caught up in them. We like it when people associate good things with our names and we feel embarrassed if for whatever reason the opposite happens. We like it when someone recognizes our name (“Aren’t you Chuck’s boy?” “Aren’t you the person who wrote that article in the Suburban Gazette a while back?”). But we feel oddly diminished when someone who should know full well *who we are* glances at our name tag with no hint of recognition or recollection. Forget a name and some folks have the feeling that we’ve forgotten the entire person, or worse yet that they are unworthy of recollection.

Besides the fact an angel of the Lord **appeared** to Joseph in a dream (who by the way is unnamed) and then Joseph did what the angel of the Lord **commanded**. **Matthew 1 is all about names!** In fact, we get a whole family tree’s worth of names right out of the chute in Matthew—42 generations to be

exact—but finally Matthew narrows down the whole chapter to one very specific name. **Well actually to two very specific names**, almost as a way to say that all of history has been leading up to this point when Someone finally comes along with a **Name above all names**, a **Name that will never be forgotten**, a **Name that will spell Life itself**. And in this case, if ever we get the name wrong, or forget it altogether, it really will not be Jesus/Immanuel who will be embarrassed. It will be us.

Suppose that one day you are reading a story in which an elderly woman is talking to her pregnant granddaughter. “Now listen, my dear,” the old woman says, “I’m asking you to name this child after your grandfather, so please give him the name Nelson.” Suppose the mother-to-be agrees. “OK, Grandma, his name will be Nelson.” But then, what would you think if the narrator of the story wrote, “And so this fulfilled a prediction once made by the pregnant woman’s father that her firstborn would be named Wallace.”

**Well, which is it: Nelson or Wallace?** And if it ends up being Nelson, then what does Wallace have to do with anything? Likewise in Matthew 1, the angel says to name the baby *Jesus*, and Matthew turns right around and says, “That’s right. He’s named little baby *Immanuel*.” And no sooner does Matthew write that and we are told that when the baby was born, Joseph did as he was told and named the little fellow “Jesus.”

Jesus/Immanuel. Immanuel/Jesus. Must we choose? Well no. Apparently, you can’t speak one without invoking the other. Jesus = Immanuel. Jesus = God with us. God with us in all our flesh-and-blood realities and messiness. God with us in diapers. God with us nursing at Mary’s breast. God with us in learning to eat small pieces of food and drinking from a cup without spilling milk down his chin.

You might say, this is, “Christ among the pots and pans” as Teresa of Avila put it. Christ among the barn animals and then those quirky Magi astrologers and then all the rest of the Gospel’s curious cast of characters. *God with us*...with all of us!

God with the prostitutes and the lepers, and the outcast in whose company Jesus would delight again and again. God at the dinner table with a chive stuck between his teeth. God lifting the cup of wine to his lips. *God with us.*

God with the little children whose warm brows he touched and blessed. God smiling when a baby was shown to him by a proud new mother. God with us in all our ordinary times and days. God with us, as Jesus would say to bookend Matthew's gospel, *even to the end of the age.* Always. *With us.* **Immanuel.**

**Immanuel** is God-with-us in the cancer clinic and at the local nursing home where people are slumped in wheelchairs pushed up against the hallway walls.

**Immanuel** is God-with-us in the Hospice room and when life's final breath slips past a dear one's lips.

**Immanuel** is God-with-us when the pink slip comes or when the beloved child sneers, "I hate you!"

**Immanuel** is God-with-us when you pack the Christmas decorations away and, with an aching heart, you realize afresh that one of your children never called over the holidays. Not once.

**Immanuel** is God-with-us when your dear wife or mother stares at you with an Alzheimer's glaze and absently asks, "What is your name again, dear?"

Ever and always Jesus stares straight into us with his two eyes and he does so not only when we can smile back but most certainly when our own eyes are full of tears.

Jesus is Immanuel *God with us*, so he **appears and commands** in our lives, just like the angel of the Lord who came to Joseph, in those times when we're so angry with God that we refuse to meet his eyes. But even when we feel like we can't look at him, **he never looks away from us.** He can't. He won't.

**Because his name says it all. Amen.**