

“Joy on the Other Side”

Theme: Christmas and Joy

Sermon Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-24

Family Activity for the Week: Many Christmas movies include selfish, self-centered characters such as Scrooge or the Grinch. However, toward each movie’s end, those characters have learned to be more kind, giving, joyful and Christ-like. Choose a Christmas movie and identify a character who grows more loving, kind and joyful throughout the story. Discuss what qualities the character had in the beginning, which ones they showed at the end and the event(s) that caused the change in their behavior or attitude. Ask each family member to share one behavior or attitude they can work to change this Christmas season. How can they be more joyful all year? How can they share this Christ-like love and joy with others? Ask God to grow your heart to be more like Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

Monday, December 23 – Read Matthew 1:18-21. Matthew didn’t give us many facts about Joseph. Matthew just wrote that, “before they were married,” Joseph’s fiancé Mary, “became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.” The fact was terribly painful at first; the story she told was incredible. Joseph was going, sensibly, “to call off their engagement quietly.” Then, in a dream, an angel from the Lord verified Mary’s story. Even more, Mary’s child would, “save his people from their sins.”

- Matthew concisely reported one other key fact about Joseph: “Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man... he didn’t want to humiliate her.” What do you learn about Joseph’s inner qualities from his measured response (“he decided to call off their engagement quietly”)? Cloud and Townsend’s book *Safe People* helped identify Biblically based qualities of “safe people.” How safe are you for others? Like Joseph, do you choose not to humiliate others?
- Being a devout Jewish man, Joseph would have to give up a sacred privilege in order to be the earthly father of Jesus and obey God’s message from the angel—siring his first-born son. Have you ever had to give up or alter some cherished dream to obey God, or might you have to? If so, how are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, the story of your miraculous conception tells us your life would upend business as usual in our broken world. Fill me with the courage to let you reshape all the parts of my life that need it. Amen.*

If you can’t make Christmas Eve services tomorrow, remember we have one tonight at 5:30 PM!

Tuesday, December 24 – Read Matthew 1:1-17. It might seem strange, and even boring to us that Matthew started Jesus’ story with 17 verses of genealogy! It’s helpful to remember that in the first century, family records were a key source of identity (even without mail order DNA kits available). King Herod the Great, despised by most Jews because he was cruel, power-hungry AND half Edomite, ordered official registers destroyed so no one could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew named three key points he meant his genealogy to show: Jesus was: the “Christ,” the “son of David,” and the “son of Abraham.”

- The Greek word “Christ,” like the Hebrew word, “Messiah,” meant “anointed one.” It was widely used to identify the deliverer God had promised to send. What do you believe made Jesus’ link to Abraham and King David so key for Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that, in Jesus, God kept the ancient promises made to those Jewish leaders, even though it was different than many people expected?
- In a male-dominated culture, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus’ genealogy. The other four (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and “the wife of Uriah”—i.e. Bathsheba) had all, like Mary, faced obstacles, even scandals, in their lives. Yet God had worked with each of them to advance God’s redeeming mission in the world. What kinds of people do we ignore or undervalue in our culture? Does God still work through people like that? In what ways is God at work through you?

Prayer: *O God, you have always been willing to work with anyone willing to work with you, no matter what their past. I want to be a part of your big redeeming story in the world. Please work through me. Amen.*

Tonight, Christmas Eve services start at 2 PM with a 30-minute service just for smaller kids. Services at 3, 5 and 9 PM are led by the Praise Team, with the 7 PM service led by the choir.

Wednesday, December 25 – Read Matthew 1:22-25. Merry Christmas! Matthew interpreted the Hebrew word “Emmanuel” for his Greek readers: Emmanuel means “God with us.” Scholar William Barclay summed up Matthew’s message: “Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like, and what God means us to be. In him alone we see what God is, and what [we] ought to be.” Joseph “did just as an angel from God commanded,” reaching beyond what seemed logical or understandable.

- Jesus would later tell his disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In what ways have you chosen to make the person of Jesus central to your understanding of what God is like? Has that helped you to set aside some of the negative, frightening images of God that limit too many people’s willingness to relate to God? If so, how has that worked?

- Joseph followed the angel's instruction (in Matthew 1:21) to name the child, "Jesus" (the Greek form of the Hebrew, "Joshua," which meant, "Yahweh is salvation"). Many Hebrews wanted salvation from the occupying Roman army. But the angel didn't talk about the Romans. This child, he said, would save people from humanity's greatest enemy: sin, missing God's path for living a fully human life. How confident are you that Jesus can in fact save you from any life missteps, that he is the savior from sin that we all need?

Prayer: *Lord, Matthew wrote that, "When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded." Awaken my heart and give me Joseph's willingness to live my life as you direct me to.*

Thursday, December 26 – Read Luke 2:41-51, Matthew 13:54-57. It would be great to have even a few words from Joseph about the glory and challenge of being Jesus' earthly father. But, alas, Joseph has no 'lines'—we don't read a single word he speaks in the Gospels. In many ways Joseph is the perfect example of a servant who does the right thing without seeking any credit. We do get a few glimpses of his influence on Jesus. We see him as a worried parent looking for a missing boy in Luke 2. And we see that Jesus' hometown looked down on him for being a carpenter's son.

- Jesus' parents were worried and asked him why he was in the Temple and not with them. Jesus replied, "Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" "My Father's house" clearly didn't refer to Joseph. After reading that story, it's fair to wonder how Joseph felt when Jesus said that to his earthly father. Skip Ewing wrote in his song, "It Wasn't his Child," that, "like a father [Joseph] was strong and kind and good.... But it wasn't his child; it was God's child." Are you, like Joseph, able to set aside your own ego needs to serve others at God's call?
- Matthew 13 mentions Jesus' mother and siblings, but not his father. Most scholars believe Joseph died sometime before Jesus' public ministry began. (The gospels don't tell us for sure.) Joseph seems to have had a 12 to 30-year window to protect Jesus and shape his growth. What opportunities do you have to serve, bless or shape people and events? Are you ever tempted to think those opportunities will last forever?

Prayer: *Lord, the gospels suggest that you and your earthly father were carpenters. Sadly, people often added the word "just" before carpenter. Help me to value all people, not only the ones who are like me or impress me. Amen.*

Friday, December 27 - Read Luke 2:1-4. Caesar Augustus' purpose was purely earthly and pragmatic: to collect more taxes for his far-flung empire. But God "bent" Caesar's decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a difficult trip for pregnant Mary. The trip cast light on Joseph's family connections being in Bethlehem, and not in Nazareth where Mary lived.

- The Christmas story shows God's Great Reversal. Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with just a decree. That night, God became human, born as a helpless baby to two peasants. Two millennia later, Jesus is revered around the world, and Augustus nearly forgotten. Where do you see God's power in the Christmas story? How does that redefine our sense of how "power" works?
- Micah was a prophet in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, he wrote that God would send a deliverer, born in the small town of Bethlehem. Hebrew scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to tell King Herod the Messiah's birthplace (Matthew 2:4-6). When have you seen God do something big through something "little"? Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, meant "house of bread." Jesus later told his followers: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). How will you allow Jesus to nourish your soul this Christmas season?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I don't live anywhere near Bethlehem, but your love and grace nourish my soul. Thank you for being a God who does big things even through the small things of earth. Amen.*

Saturday, December 28 – Read Luke 2:5-7. We know this story so well: the crowded town, the heartless innkeepers, the wooden barn full of animals. Or do we? It's important to notice that there is no mention of an old wooden barn. The story doesn't tell us that they arrived just as Mary was going into labor. The word "inn" does show up in most English translations, but this is largely due to tradition. In these verses, the Greek word used, "*kataluma*," is more accurately translated as, "guestroom." *Kataluma* was the equivalent of a spare bedroom, which would have been full of family who had come to Bethlehem for the census. Putting Mary and Joseph in the stable may have been an act of compassion, giving them privacy as she gave birth.

- Whether the inn or guestroom was full, Jesus' birth took place in an animal shelter because the other options were too crowded. Year round, and particularly at holiday seasons like Christmas, many of us live very crowded lives. What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year? How are you making room in your heart, and in your life, for Him?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you were born in an animal shelter, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.*

We have Saturday night worship at 5:30 PM and ONE SERVICE SUNDAY at 10 AM. Both will be simple services with Christmas Songs, Bible readings and a brief, but powerful message.