

Joy of Salvation • Matthew 1:18-25

“Angle” can mean everything. In football the referee may call a touchdown when the camera’s angle looks like a near miss. The difference may determine the outcome of the game.

Maybe you know this story from Stephen Covey’s best-selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One Sunday morning he was on a New York subway. Just a handful of people were peacefully riding along—some were dozing; some were reading the newspaper; no one was in conversation with anyone else. It was quiet until the subway stopped at a station where a man and his children boarded. The man sat down next to Steven Covey and looked toward the floor. Closing his eyes he seemed oblivious to his children who were running up and down the aisle, jumping on the seats, yelling and shouting, throwing things, grabbing newspapers out of the hands of passers, slapping them away, until everyone was provoked and irritated. But no one had the courage to say anything.

Finally Covey mustered up enough courage to confront the man sitting next to him. As diplomatically but directly as he could he said, “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you could control them a little bit better.”

The man sort of snapped to consciousness and said softly, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it, either.”

Steven Covey writes:

Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? My paradigm shifted. Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw things differently, I *thought* differently. I *felt* differently. I *behaved* differently. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behav-

ior; my heart was filled with the man’s pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely. “Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?” Everything changed in an instant.

There was an even greater paradigm shift connected to the Christmas story. Joseph the carpenter was totally transformed from one angle to another. Joseph started out being full of happiness. It should have been the happiest time of his entire life. He was engaged and was scheduled to marry one of the most wonderful women who ever lived.

If their engagement was typical of engagements at their time and place in history, it was probably an arranged marriage. Parents in Palestine at that time considered marriage far too im-

portant a decision to be entrusted to their children. Often the deal was struck when boys and girls were quite young. Imagine what it would be like sitting next to your 5-year old fiancée in kindergarten!

Or, maybe a matchmaker arranged their marriage. In that case, Joseph may have

been older and looking for a bride. A matrimonial headhunter was hired and searched until Mary was found and a deal was struck with her parents.

It wasn’t that the bride and the groom had no say about it. First there was a period of engagement that could start from infancy. Then came the formal betrothal lasting a year before the actual wedding. Before the betrothal either one could back out, although there would be huge family and community pressure against that. If both accepted the proposed marriage they were then formally betrothed for one year, although they continued to live in their parents’ homes and strictly avoided sexual relationships.

The betrothal was serious stuff. It was as legally binding as marriage itself and required a divorce to break it up. If the husband died during

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the year the woman became known as a virgin widow.

Absolute happiness turned into the deepest hurt the day Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant. There is no worse betrayal than by someone you deeply love and trust and no more painful way to betray than by adultery. Adultery has a way of changing everything. It reinterprets all the years that precede it. Every memory, every smile, all of life is somehow altered. The pain can be indescribable.

And so it was for Joseph. We're not told how he found out. I would like to think that Mary told him, but it may not have been that way at all. Maybe it was first a whispered rumor. Perhaps it was gutter gossip outside the furniture shop in Nazareth. Maybe at first he refused to accept the information, determined to defend her honor. Maybe he surged into anger smashing the project he was working on. Maybe he simply broke down and cried.

All Joseph's dreams were simultaneously shattered. The hope of a home and a family and living "happily ever after" were ended like a puff of smoke. What would he do? What would happen? What future was left?

He did what most men do in a crisis. He tried to figure out a solution. The first solution that came to his mind was the most frightening of all. He could have her killed. That may seem rather extreme to us, but they lived under the strict Old Testament laws of Deuteronomy that classified pre-marital sex as a capital offense. All he needed to do was announce her pregnancy and others would join in the public execution by stoning her to death.

He must have been tempted to give her the worst. He must have thought about getting even. It is a natural and normal response to extreme betrayal. She had forever hurt him and he could forever get even. Besides, then he wouldn't have to see her child running about the streets of Nazareth as a constant reminder of what had happened.

If the local elders refused to stone her at least he could disgrace her with a public announcement. But, he had second thoughts. He loved Mary and wanted the best for her, no matter how much she had hurt him. And, he was a good man. Revenge

was not who he was. Instead, he decided to turn to another provision of the Hebrew law and that was to divorce her in the presence of two witnesses. That would end their relationship. She could go to the other man or do whatever else she wanted to do.

With heavy heart, Joseph settled on his decision. Divorce it would be. Divorce—too soon, too painful, too permanent, too sad. What he had thought was meant to be would never be. What he thought was ordained by God in heaven had been shattered by sin on earth. From Joseph's point of view there would be no Christmas. From Joseph's point of view this whole thing was a disaster. From Joseph's point of view everything had gone wrong. From Joseph's point of view there was no hope, and there certainly was no joy.

He went to bed that night filled with sadness and fear. I suspect he tossed and turned fitfully, rehearsing everything that tomorrow would hold. Morning meant doing what he had made up his mind to do, and he feared the dawn. But Matthew 1:20 tells us:

After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Now that was a new thought! He never considered that before. Don't be afraid? Marry Mary? The Holy Spirit impregnated her? It was the kind of dream that could make a man ask to see the angel's ID. In one's wildest imagination this seemed too farfetched to believe. It was either a spectacularly divine truth or the lamest explanation of a surprise pregnancy that anyone had ever invented.

This angel certainly had a different angle on everything that was going on! The angel saw Mary's pregnancy as good, not bad. The angel said that her condition was from God, not from sin. The angel believed that this was the best news Joseph could ever hear, not the worst.

And the angel's angle was based on facts. The fact was that Mary was still a virgin. The fact was that Mary was supernaturally pregnant. The fact was that God himself had stepped into human life

and history as never before. The fact was that this moment fulfilled prophecies declared generations and centuries before. The fact was that Joseph and Mary would be forever honored, not disgraced.

Now Joseph had a far bigger decision to make. Would he interpret life the old way or the new way? Was he willing to have his mind converted, his heart changed and his life transformed by a totally different angle on what had happened?

Frankly, Joseph faced the same decision we all face. Do we look at life our way or from God's angle? Do we see the triumph of sin or the triumph of grace? Do we believe our instincts or do we believe God's revelation? If Joseph decided to switch from his angle to the angel's angle, his fears would disappear and be forever replaced with hope and joy.

The angel kept on talking, saying, "*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" Here was a promise that the tiny baby inside Mary would be born a boy. This was a verifiable prediction. If the baby turned out to be a girl, the angel was clearly a hoax!

The baby boy was to be named Jesus. It really wasn't that unusual a name. Jesus is merely the Greek pronunciation of the very common Hebrew name Joshua. It was as common as Johnson or Anderson is in the Minneapolis phone book. The name was not important but the meaning was special. Jesus, or Joshua, means "the Lord saves".

In those days names meant more than they usually do today. The angel was ordering a name that would remind Mary and Joseph about the child's divine purpose every time they called him or spoke his name. This promised child came with a powerful purpose: "*. . . you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*"

At last the angel's angle is fully declared. That's what this is all about—sin and salvation. Suddenly there was a whole new meaning to ev-

erything that was happening. The meaning was global, not personal. This child was for all humankind, not for just an obscure couple in a little-known town located in an out-of-the-way part of the world. This boy was born to save all people from sin and the consequences of sin.

What a paradigm shift Joseph needed to make! He was thinking about stoning and God was planning salvation. He thought the baby was because of sin and the baby was coming to save from sin. He thought this

was the source of his greatest sadness and pain; God said this was the source of salvation and joy.

Now, in order to see Christmas from the angel's angle there are some adjustments we also need to make to our thinking. We must acknowledge that people need to be saved from sins—we all need to be saved from our sins. We must admit that we are absolutely helpless and lost without someone from God to save us.

Martin Gurule escaped from death row at a Texas maximum-security prison. The sheriff of the county made a public statement that was nationally broadcast. He said that the escaped convict must "turn himself in or face the consequences." Think about that. What consequences was he thinking about? This man was condemned to die one way or the other. No matter what he did, he was a goner.

That's the way it is with us sinners. Our sins have condemned us and we are eternal goners—unless God himself steps in with a Savior from the outside.

The angel's angle was that Jesus was God's Savior sent from the outside. He was born to grow up and die on the cross as a means to save us goners from the consequences of our sins. That gives a whole new meaning to Christmas. It's not mostly a baby story. It's mostly a Savior story.

Well, so much for Joseph's angle and the angel's angle. What's your angle on the Christmas story? From your point of view, how do you

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see yourself this Christmas? From your point of view, how do you see Jesus?

Understand that to be a Christian is to convert, to change angles, to see things differently, to believe. It is to see Jesus as the Savior from sin, as *your* Savior from sin. It is to admit that you are an eternal goner without him. It is to claim him as Savior. It is to see and feel and personally experience the joy of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:24-25 of the Christmas story tells us what Joseph did:

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

He did it! He gave him the name the angel said. Joseph changed his angle. He believed.

If you were to tell God today what you believe about Jesus and Christmas, about sin and salvation, what would you say? Would you tell him you have changed your view, that you believe, that you too name Jesus as your Savior from sin? Is that what you would say? Then say it! Tell God your Christmas angle of faith—and experience the joy of salvation!

Father, one more time, thank you for Jesus. One more time, thank you for lov-

ing us and caring for us. One more time, thank you for listening to the thoughts and the prayers of our hearts as we convert, as we become Christians, as we change our angle, as we say that we believe.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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