

## *Joseph & Mary Decided to Parent— Luke 1:26–28; Matthew 1:19–25*

My brother's daughter is pregnant for the first time at 38 years old; her husband is 45 years old. Their journey of parenthood has been an interesting story. They struggled with infertility for years, and because of that decided to adopt. They adopted a son whom they loved dearly, only to have him reclaimed by his birth mother under the laws of their state. What was delight, turned into heartbreak. The mother that he barely knew still prays for him daily, a son that she will probably never see again.

They adopted again and again. When the new baby is born, their family of four will become a family of five.

The decision to parent certainly has to be counted as one of the most important decisions of life. For some it is a decision that is passionately made; for some it is a decision that is prayerfully made; for others it is a decision that is unintentionally made.

For Mary and Joseph, it was a decision that was supernaturally made, for God chose them out of the entire population of the human race through all of history to be the mother and father of his son Jesus.

But it is not as if this Christmas couple had nothing at all themselves to decide, for as we all know very well, there is a great difference between birthing a child and parenting a child. As wonderful as birth is, it is comparatively brief, whereas parenting is a lifelong opportunity and responsibility. It was God who chose Mary and Joseph, but it was Mary and Joseph who chose to be God's parents for God's son.

The story is one of the most familiar and famous of all stories of history. It is most often told at Christmastime, but perhaps by looking at it in a different season we can hear and see it from a different perspective. Mary's side of the story is in Luke 1:26-38.

*In the sixth month, 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. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him*

*the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."*

*"I am the Lord's servant." Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

The other side of the story, Joseph's side, is in Matthew 1:18-25.

*This is how the birth of Jesus came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But 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. 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."*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" — which means, "God with us."*

*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.*

They were in love; they were engaged; and like every engaged couple, they were filled with plans and dreams and expectations. Mary and Joseph expected to have a fine family wedding. It was to be pure and honorable in the very best sense. Joseph and Mary certainly had the same hormones and sexual passion as any other man and woman, but neither the intensity nor the power of that sexual passion was going to stand

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in the way of a commitment that they had made to God and to each other. They had chosen to wait for the wedding and not have sexual intimacy together until they were married.

They expected to have children. At that time in their culture children were considered one of the greatest evidences of the blessing of God. And, of course, they expected that the children would be their children. Just as they would share marriage and intimacy, they would also share the child that would be uniquely theirs and theirs alone.

They expected to live an ordinary life, nothing spectacular. He was a carpenter. He would have his own shop; they would establish their home; they would have children; and when they died they would probably, like all of the rest of us, soon be forgotten. Never did they dream that their lives would be special in any way.

Yes, they had their expectations, but God had different plans, bigger dreams and greater hopes. He told them that Mary would become supernaturally pregnant and that she would give birth to a child while she was still a virgin. The child born to her would be uniquely divine and human, God and man at the same time, and would become the Savior of the human race.

God expected them to raise his Son! They would teach the man who would be the most articulate speaker in human history how to talk; they would guide the first steps of the One who would someday walk on water. They would lead the Son of God in his first nighttime prayers.

God's expectations of Mary and Joseph were great, and they came as a complete surprise. For while it is true that God uniquely honored them, he also shattered their dreams. He changed their expectations. Mary would walk down the wedding aisle pregnant, something that she never thought would happen. Joseph would parent a child to whom he had no genetic relationship whatsoever. Their lives would be anything but ordinary, as all of heaven and all of history would watch every detail of what they did. They would become two of the most famous people who ever lived.

There's a lesson for us here. When we make our plans, we should leave them open to divine surprises. To be sure, it is appropriate and good to think ahead, to lay out plans, to think things through, but also to not be disappointed if we discover that God has a different plan, a different schedule or a different dream.

You may have expected that you would have children and the surprise is that you have not. Or you may have thought that you would have no children or that there would be no more and the surprise is an unexpected pregnancy. It should not be rejected, but counted as a gift of a life that comes from God. Discover the greatness and the grace of God in surprises none of us

would ever choose — including disappointments, unemployment, divorce, disease or maybe even death. Or when you are surprised by success and prosperity that no one ever would have predicted for you, take it as a God-given opportunity.

When God lays on us expectations and responsibilities that were not part of our five-year plan, we ought to consider them to be God-given opportunities, for God is never surprised. He knows the end from the beginning and he sees how all the pieces fit together. I suspect that he takes a great delight in giving to us the surprises of life.

For centuries Christians used to insert the letters "D.V." when they would write letters to one another. So they would write, "I expect to come to Minneapolis next week and look forward to getting together with you perhaps for lunch on Friday, D.V." The D.V. is Latin for *Deus Volit* or "God willing." Christians still say, "See you on Sunday, God willing." The idea is to hold all of life's plans open to the surprises and the expectations of God.

Now for Joseph, to be sure, it was a great surprise to find out that Mary was pregnant. We don't know how he found out. It seems to be hinted that the information did not come from Mary. It must have been someone else who found out her secret and perhaps revealingly, perhaps maliciously whispered to Joseph the news that the woman whom he was to marry was pregnant. We don't know how he found out, but I think that we can have a pretty good idea of how he must have felt. Joseph loved Mary. They were engaged and they had agreed that they would not have sexual intimacy together until they were married. And now she was pregnant, and he knew that he was not the man.

There are very few betrayals in life as painful as having someone you love secretly sharing sexual intimacy with another person. It is a pain for which there are no words of description. It is a hurt from which some people never heal. Joseph was convinced that he was terribly wronged. He had every right to break the engagement, call off the relationship, cancel the wedding and act out in revenge. You would expect that he would have initially wanted to humiliate her. According to law at that time, he could have insisted that she be tried and even stoned to death.

But Joseph decided to do something else. Matthew 1:19 tells us that he decided to do what was right, even though he had been wronged. "*Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*" The customs of that time considered engagement to be as binding as we consider marriage today, and it required a legal divorce to break off an engagement.

I would like to say that the reason Joseph did what he did was because he loved her so much and, even though he was wronged, he wanted to protect her reputation. I suspect that that may be true, but that is not what the record says. The Bible says he did what he did because he was a righteous man. He had the kind of character that was committed to doing that which was right even though he obviously was wronged.

That is the kind of husband you want to marry. That is the type of wife that you ought to pray for. If you are married, that is the kind of husband or wife that every Christian ought to be. I will tell you, it is a fabulous thing for any person to be married to a man or woman who has such good and strong character on the inside that the person does what is right even when wronged.

For us, when making our greatest decisions, the lesson here is to always do what is right, even if we have been wronged. We are not to use the evil that someone else has done to us as an excuse to do evil back to them, but to make righteous and good decisions regardless of the circumstances that surround us. If you work for a company that treats you unfairly, do the best job you can, anyway. If you are terribly and unfairly underpaid, do not use that as justification to steal from your employer. If a relationship has gone wrong and you have been deeply hurt, like Joseph, do not hurt back.

It is true that Mary hadn't really wronged Joseph or done anything wrong. But when Joseph made his decision he didn't know that; all of the evidence indicated that he had been terribly wronged. The most impressive thing about Joseph is that he was determined to do what was right before he ever found out the whole story. That's how I want to make my decisions. That's the kind of person that I want to be — doing right no matter what.

As for Mary, she also had a decision to make, for she agreed; she said "yes" to becoming the virgin mother of Jesus long before she could possibly understand what this was all about. She was young, in love, engaged to be married and a virgin. She was probably a young teenager, if she was typical of the marrying age of her era, when unexpectedly an angel from God showed up and said that God was somehow going to see to it that she became pregnant. She asked what any of us would ask, "How is that going to be?" You see, she was no physiologist; she was not sexually experienced; but neither was she naive. She understood the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. She was a virgin, not by chance; she was a virgin by choice. She knew how babies were conceived

and born and she did not understand how God was going to do what the angel proposed.

That should come as no surprise because 2,000 years later we still haven't figured out what God did or how it all fits together. It was a miracle. It was supernatural. We don't understand and, of course, she didn't understand, but she said "yes."

She could not have known that the embryo inside of her would be God and human at the same time. She couldn't have known that he would become a perfect man, that he would perform miracles, that one day she would stand at the foot of a hill and watch this son now just conceived, be sacrificed on a cross for human sin, that he would rise from the dead or that he would someday rule heaven and earth.

Mary did not understand these things, but she still said "yes." *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."* For some of us, it is very difficult to make important decisions in life without having all of the information in advance. We insist that we must understand before we agree to anything. We like to do a lot of research before we decide on anything.

Several years ago I was shopping for a boat. I went to the Boat Shows, I visited all the boat dealers and I read all the classified ads for boats. My family went along with me at first, but eventually they reached the point where they refused to go with me to see any more boats. They said, "This is nuts. Just buy a boat!" More or less, I wanted to check out every boat in Minnesota before making my decision. Basically, what I did was turn what should have been a happy and wonderful family experience into a torturous ordeal for everyone involved.

I needed to learn from Mary that there are some decisions to be made without understanding. There are some decisions for which we cannot calculate all of the risk nor have all of the data. We must decide on the

basis of the incomplete information that God gives to us. There remains uncertainty. There will be risk. As Christians, we are responsible to make the wisest decisions we can with the information that

God makes available to us and to fill the gaps with faith. The difference is that as Christians we have the conviction that God is on our side; he is pulling for us; he knows all of the circumstances of which we are ignorant. And like Mary, we say "yes" long before we can possibly understand what it's all about.

For Joseph the decision was not limited to deciding to go ahead and quickly marry Mary and bring her

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to his home. No, it was an ongoing set of decisions every day, to serve in God's place as the father to God's son.

There were challenges to this decision. No matter how well he did, there was no credit for him. When Jesus spoke his great speeches, when he gave the Sermon on the Mount, when he was able to confound the most educated of his day, when he performed miracles or when he demonstrated sterling character, no one said, "Oh it's probably because of what Joseph taught him; it's probably because of Joseph's influence." No, they all said it was because of God. Maybe somebody said it was because of Mary, but no one gave credit to Joseph.

There must have been many days when there were those who with whispers or maybe right to his face said, "You know, Jesus looks a lot like Mary, but he doesn't look much like you." As other children were born to this marriage and they did resemble Joseph, it must have been repeated again and again. It started rumors about Mary's morality and Jesus' paternity that have not disappeared after 2,000 years.

The record says little about the parenting practices of Joseph, so all we can do is fit together the hints and try to paint the picture. My guess is that he was a very good father. Early in Jesus' life when a politician got so defensive that he began to kill all young boys, Joseph did what a father had to do. He quit his business, left the country and went to another land with another language at great sacrifice, so that he could protect Jesus.

As the years went by, Joseph was the kind of parent that allowed Jesus to become all that he was destined to be. He began increasingly to let go. I wonder if he ever heard the words that a man named Peter said to Jesus, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" And although Joseph got no credit, his heart must have welled up with pride and delight.

And what about our decisions? Let us never be dismayed when God calls upon us to be his agents. Let us not be discouraged when we do not get the credit for the good that we do. Welcome the opportunity to be the agent of God in the life of a child, in the life of someone who may be a delight or someone who may be a burden and a difficulty. Like Joseph you may become God's surrogate to raise a son or daughter who does not carry your chromosomes. You may stand in the shadows after a lot of hard work as someone else stands in the spotlight and gets the applause. You may be chosen by God to represent him, maybe not in a parenting relationship, but in your company or in your neighborhood, in your family.

Finally, there is a line in this story of Joseph and Mary that should, I think, profoundly affect all of our decisions. They were not Mary's words, but the words

from an angel named Gabriel. It was something an angel would probably know better than a mortal would know. Luke 1:37 says, "*Nothing is impossible with God.*"

It is very important to understand who said this to whom. It was not Mary saying, "Here are my plans and here are my dreams, God. Do them, because nothing is impossible with you." To the contrary, it was God who supernaturally announced to Mary his plans for her life and when she asked how it was possible, it was God who communicated the message through his angel that nothing is impossible with him.

Let us be extremely cautious that we do not think that faith is deciding what you want and then manipulating God into using his resources to accomplish your desires. To the contrary, Christian faith is to have our hearts and our lives open to God

What do you hear God saying to you? It may be to leave a destructive addiction. It may be to help someone in need. It may be to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and be completely transformed. As impossible as God's call may seem, make your decision remembering and believing that "*Nothing is impossible with God!*" He not only dreams his great plans for our lives, but he is the God who can make them happen.

When you make your life's great decisions, welcome God's surprises and his expectations. Choose to do what is right, even if you are wronged. Agree with God and say "yes," even when you don't understand all that that "yes" may mean. Do what God wants you to do, even if you get none of the credit. And trust God for the impossible.

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