

# THWARTED EXPECTATIONS

SERIES: GOOD NEWS, GREAT JOY



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Matthew 1:18-25  
Third Message  
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*Ezra 10*

This started out to be a sermon on decision-making. At some point, I realized that it wasn't coming together. Now, a sermon on decision-making would be an appropriate application of Matthew 1:18-25. The protagonist, Joseph, has a decision to make. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, I couldn't fit the sermon into my vision for it. This was frustrating because I had already spent quite some time on the sermon.

In this case, the creation of a sermon, which usually includes illustrations, is an illustration all by itself. You start out expecting one thing, but then you realize that it's turning into something else. At first, you don't necessarily welcome the "something else." In fact, you may even fight it, because it thwarts your expectations.

Joseph was betrothed to Mary. He expected to marry a non-pregnant woman, but his betrothal turned into something else. What do you do when your expectations turn into something else?

This is the third week in a four-week Advent series we're calling "Good News, Great Joy." We're looking at angelic announcements to individuals in the early chapters of the gospels of Luke and Matthew. So far, we've heard angelic announcements to Zechariah and Mary. Next week, we'll hear the angelic announcement to shepherds. Today, we will hear the announcement to Joseph.

## Good news or bad news?

**Matthew 1:18-19:**

**Now 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. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.**

To be "betrothed" as a Jew in the first century was a more serious matter than to be engaged in our day. Betrothal, which usually lasted about a year, was tantamount to a legally binding marriage. During this period, Mary was "found" to be pregnant—that is, she began to show.

Matthew informs us, however, that—shockingly—her pregnancy is not attributable to Joseph or any other man but to the Holy Spirit. Talk about an unplanned pregnancy!

Then again, from God's perspective, this is anything but unplanned. He's been planning this since the first humans turned their backs on him. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit doesn't deem it necessary to inform Joseph about the nature of Mary's pregnancy.

The public would likely conclude that Mary and quite possibly Joseph are guilty. And what is Joseph, who knows he's innocent, to conclude? The most likely conclusion—seemingly the only possible conclusion—is that Mary has been unfaithful to him.

This is the beginning of the gospel, the good news, but it doesn't start out as good news to Joseph. His fiancé is pregnant, apparently by another man. That's bad news. That's crushing news. Joseph has a decision to make. If he follows through with the betrothal, he marries a woman who he believes has been unfaithful to him while at the same time tacitly admitting to his own guilt.

Matthew literally describes Joseph as a "righteous" man. What does a righteous man do? Joseph decides that he cannot marry her. But he also does not wish to expose Mary, so he plans to divorce her quietly. As a righteous man, Joseph is compassionate. Righteousness does not equal compassion, but righteousness includes compassion.

## Thwarted expectations

Whether we're just starting out, close to finishing up, or somewhere in between, most of us have some vision for how we want our lives to proceed.

If you're just starting out, you may want to get a good education, get married, have a family, and begin a satisfying career. If you're close to finishing up, you may want to hold on to what's left of your health, not to mention your faculties, enjoy your children and grandchildren if you have them, do a few things you've always wanted to do before it's too late, and finish strong. If you're somewhere in between, you may want to see if you can do something more meaningful with your life and see your children, if you have them, become established.

Whatever your station, you probably don't want to hear the kind of news that Joseph heard. You don't want to hear news that thwarts your expectations.

Nevertheless, you need to know this: there are things going on that you don't know about. Joseph knew that his fiancé was with child, but he didn't know she was with child from the Holy Spirit. God doesn't deem it necessary to inform us about everything that's going on.

Therefore, if you base your assessment of developments solely on what you know (e.g., your fiancé is pregnant), your assessment is always going to be incomplete at best and seriously flawed at worst.

One day, when he was thirty-five years old, St. Anthony, a Medieval Portuguese monk, decided to spend a night alone in a cave to meet with God, according to his biographer, St. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria. Instead, he was assaulted by a multitude of demons in multiple ways. Not exactly what he was expecting.

Joseph gets a little more information—strangely enough, when he's asleep.

## A different plan

### Matthew 1:20:

**But 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.”**

The “things” that Joseph considers are the things reported in Matthew 1:18-19: both Mary's unexpected pregnancy and his plan to divorce her quietly. He's decided to divorce Mary, but he hasn't done so yet. And he's still pondering things. After all he's been through,

how could he stop pondering things? He's pondering these things as he falls asleep.

After falling asleep, Joseph has a dream about these things, which wouldn't be unusual. Don't your dreams sometimes have something to do with what you've been pondering? Then again, how often does an angel of the Lord appear to you in a dream?

The angel addresses him by name and lineage: “Joseph son of David.” Joseph is a descendant of David, the prototypical king of Israel from whose line the Messiah, the ultimate king of Israel, was expected to come.

Joseph has a plan to divorce Mary, but the angel has a different plan. Joseph is not said to be afraid to take Mary as his wife; he is said to be a righteous man who plans to divorce her in a righteous way for righteous reasons. The angel says: marry her. One could imagine many reasons why a man would be afraid to marry such a woman, but before Joseph even has a chance to entertain such reasons, the angel instructs him: “do not fear.”

What's the reason Joseph need not fear? Because Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. When Joseph “considered these things,” he probably didn't consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit had impregnated his fiancé. Finally, the angel lets him in on the secret.

The angel continues.

## A name for the son

### Matthew 1:21:

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

The angel says Mary will give birth. As everyone knows, not all pregnancies result in birth. The angel assures Joseph that his one will. Moreover, the angel reveals the gender of the child: Mary is going to have a son. No ultrasound is necessary.

The angel also has a name in mind. No baby name books are necessary. Joseph is to name him Jesus, which would not be an unusual name for a first century Jewish boy. The Hebrew translation of the name is Joshua. The name means “The Lord saves.”

The reason for naming the boy Jesus, however, is anything but usual: “he will save his people from their

sins.” Jesus will save his people not from the pagans, as other men, empowered by the Lord, had done but from their sins. Jesus saves us not necessarily from what we want to be saved from; instead, he saves us from ourselves.

Moreover, as the gospel of Matthew unfolds, the people of Jesus will include pagans who forsake their gods for the God of Israel (Matthew 3:9, 8:11, 16:18, 28:19). Furthermore, Jesus will “give his life as a ransom” in order to save his people from their sins (Matthew 20:28).

The exceptional pregnancy portends an exceptional son with an exceptionally significant vocation.

What Joseph thought was bad news has turned out to be good news. Something that started out thwarting his expectations for marriage is turning out to be beyond anything that he could hope for.

The Holy Spirit didn’t deem it necessary to inform Joseph concerning the nature of his fiancé’s pregnancy, which created quite a predicament for Joseph. Eventually, an angel gets around to letting Joseph in on the secret but didn’t deem it necessary to inform the public, which, again, creates quite a predicament for Joseph. God doesn’t make it easy for Joseph. In fact, God makes it quite difficult for Joseph. God does seem to have a penchant for waiting until the last minute to come through.

Next, Matthew tells us that Mary’s unusual pregnancy, though a surprise to Joseph, was anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures.

## Prophetic fulfillment

**Matthew 1:22-23:**

**All 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).**

Mary’s pregnancy by the Holy Spirit was anticipated by a prophet centuries ago. Matthew doesn’t identify the prophet, but anyone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures would know that his name is Isaiah.

However, what the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 had to do with the virginal conception of a woman centuries later would not have been obvious to the first hearers of Isaiah—or to Joseph for that matter. In Isaiah’s day, there was a near-term fulfillment, which didn’t have to do with a virginal conception. Nevertheless, the immediate context of Isaiah hints at a greater fulfillment to come (Isaiah 8:8-10, 9:6-7, 11:1-16).

The angel told Joseph that “you shall call his name Jesus,” but now Matthew, channeling Isaiah, says that “they shall call his name Immanuel.” Which is it, Jesus or Immanuel? Well, both.

Immanuel would be a secondary name, akin to a title, like the secondary name that was given to Solomon, Jedidiah, which means “Beloved of the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:25). No one in the gospels calls Jesus Immanuel, just as no one in the Hebrew Scriptures called Solomon Jedidiah.

The name Immanuel means “God with Us.” In Jesus, God is with us not least to save us from our sins. Jesus echoes his secondary name at the end of the gospel of Matthew when he commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

## Beyond what you could hope for

What you hear as bad news may in fact turn out to be good news. You might think that your fiancé is pregnant by another man, so to speak, but in reality, God is doing something much bigger than you could have imagined. Maybe such a possibility never occurred to you.

It didn’t occur to Joseph that his fiancé was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. It didn’t occur to him that the child growing inside his fiancé’s womb would save his people from their sins. It didn’t occur to him that her pregnancy had anything to do with ancient prophecies. Joseph “considered” things, but he didn’t consider such possibilities. How could he?

Something that starts out thwarting your expectations may turn into something beyond what you could have hoped for. An obstacle to you may be a steppingstone for God. Somewhere down the line, at just the right time and in just the right way, he may let you in on the secret. He may not send you an angel, but you’ll wake up one day, and you’ll know.

Remember: you can't outdream God. The apostle Paul says we cannot begin to imagine "what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Jim Elliot, a young missionary, wrote this to his friend Elisabeth Howard, who eventually became his wife: "Is it not, for all its sting, a wonderful way to live, Betty? To dream and want and pray, almost savagely; then to commit and wait and see him quietly pile all dreams aside and replace them with what we could not dream, the realized will?"<sup>1</sup>

What do you think: Is it not a wonderful way to live?

Eventually, after the multitude of demons tormented St Anthony for many hours, a bright light filled the cave. With that, the demons fled. Anthony recognized in the light the presence of the Lord. Something bad turned into something good.

When Joseph is sleeping, he doesn't have to do anything, of course. Eventually, he wakes up.

## Change in plans

### Matthew 1:24-25:

**When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.**

Matthew does not report that Joseph questioned what he experienced while he was asleep. I might have thought to myself, "Whoa, that was a weird one," or at least, "Did I get that right?" Matthew, on the other hand, simply reports that Joseph did what the angel told him to do.

When he went to sleep, Joseph planned to divorce Mary. When he wakes up, he changes plans. He was going to divorce her quietly to protect her from shame. In taking Mary as his wife, however, Joseph exposes himself to shame. The angel told him "do not fear." Joseph does not fear—or, at least fear doesn't stop him from obeying the angel's command. Indeed, Joseph is a righteous man.

Joseph didn't have sexual relations with Mary until after she gave birth. Matthew's wording suggests that after they were married, Joseph and Mary did what married couples do. Indeed, Matthew later reports that Jesus had brothers (Matthew 12:46).

Joseph also names the boy according to the angel's command. Because of his dream, when he calls the boy Jesus, Joseph knows the destiny of the boy ("he will save his people from their sins") even if he doesn't yet know how he will go about fulfilling that destiny. The name will serve as a constant reminder to Joseph of what the angel told him in his dream.

## Wait for the Lord

Why doesn't God deem it necessary to inform us about everything that's going on? Because he leaves room for something that is necessary: he leaves room for faith.

Now, when you hear what sounds like bad news, you could concentrate on a verse such as Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." The Spirit, illuminating the word that he breathed out, could give you assurance based on the stunning truth articulated in that verse. Then again, he may not.

Then again, you may need to do what David, Joseph's ancestor, did: you may need to lament (e.g., Psalm 22). You may need to cry out to him, which, strange as it may seem, increases your capacity to listen for his voice even as the bad news echoes in your heart. This is so because when you cry out to God, you are accessing something deep in your heart, thereby making it accessible to him.

God leaves room for lament. Faith is forged when we hear bad news, while we lament and hope that maybe God will turn it into good news. As Paul McCartney sings, "There will be an answer / Let it be."<sup>2</sup> The prophet Isaiah, whom Matthew alludes to in this story, promises that those who "wait for the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31). Note: they will renew their strength *as* they wait for the Lord.

What Joseph will need going forward is faith. For crying out loud, he'll be parenting the Son of God! What we need going forward is faith, because who knows what we'll be facing?

When light filled the room, the demons fled. St. Anthony asked, "Where were you, Lord?" The Lord answered him, "Anthony, I was present at your side. But I waited, observing your fight. And since you have resisted so bravely, I will now always be at your side, and I will make your name famous throughout the world." With that, according to his biographer, Anthony stood up, prayed and "felt in his body an even greater vigor



than before.” The Lord waited, so Anthony waited—and the waiting strengthened his faith.

I meet regularly with a group of men, and last week we all shared stories of how something seemingly bad in our lives turned into something good. When you watch God turn bad news into good news a few times, you have the opportunity to get what you need going forward: faith.

## **As savagely as you like**

Wait for the Lord to turn bad news into good news. You may have to wait until the Second Advent of Jesus, but don't give up.

This sermon started out to be about decision-making and ended up being about waiting, which, I think, is more in keeping with Advent. For Advent is about waiting, isn't it? It's about waiting for Christmas Day, which celebrates the First Advent, and, beyond that, waiting for the Second Advent. Yes, we're waiting for Jesus to return.

Until then, dream and want and pray and hope and lament and cry out, as savagely as you like, and when you see Jesus face to face, you'll be ready for all that he has for you for all eternity.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than watchmen for the morning,  
more than watchmen for the morning.  
(Psalm 130:5-6).

## **Endnotes**

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1958), 91.
2. The Beatles. 1970. “Let It Be.” Track #6 on Let It Be. Apple and EMI.