

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[d]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[e] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[f] because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[g] (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

What a guy! I don't know how I would have reacted if I had been in that situation. I mean, how have you responded when God decides to teach you about how much control you have over your life?

We don't know a lot about Joseph. Matthew tells us that he is a descendant from King David of the Old Testament. He's a righteous man, that is, he knew God's law and followed it as well as a sinner is able. We would say today: he's a good guy. And he was engaged! How exciting with wedding bells in the air and plans made. He was ready to bring home his wife. He was ready to start a family. He had thought it through and made the plans. Things were under his control.

Until they weren't. Joseph finds out his dearly beloved who he planned to marry is pregnant. It wasn't an accident on Joseph's part. He was a righteous man. He and Mary were doing what God calls all his people to do waiting to live together, waiting for sex until after the marriage. But Mary was pregnant. Logically this must mean that Mary had not been faithful to their promise to be married. Mary had broken the trust. As Joseph considers the situation, he decides that he could not go through with this marriage. At the same time Joseph didn't want to humiliate Mary further. Mary would have a difficult enough time because of her present situation. So, Joseph would divorce her secretly, quietly. He would break off the engagement. I'm sure Joseph had plenty of sleepless nights and restless days as

he's considering this whole situation. How was he going to confront Mary? How was he going to explain this to other people when the wedding plans were off? Then one night when he did fall asleep, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream: **“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. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[1] because he will save his people from their sins”** (v.20-21). It doesn't seem like Joseph is in much control at all.

It doesn't take an angel appearing in our dreams for us to see and realize how little control we have of our lives. From broken down vehicles, blizzards, to sudden sickness, we are quickly reminded of this fact. Oh, we try to have some resemblance of control as we try to make sure family members make the “right” decision. We try plan our holiday schedules so they are “just right.” But schedules can be quickly ruined. You can't make anyone do anything. Then there's your work—whether boss or employee—your control is still limited where you are always answering to “someone” and their expectations of you. Your attitude that you want to do better until you find yourself slipping back into bad habits and too easily affected by what other people do or don't do. We see what's going on in our world in our society, shake our heads and feel so powerless as we wring our hands in worry with what our children and grandchildren will have to grow up in. But we aren't the ones in control, are we? We have so little—if really any—control even in our day-to-day lives with the food we eat to the clothes we wear (that's even controlled by our personal diets and economic state).

And how do we react when we realize how little control we have? We worry, we blame, we point our finger at whose fault it is that we find ourselves in this place. We get angry, lose our tempers, say, and do things we know we shouldn't all the while trying to excuse ourselves but failing to see how we even let our emotions control us. Not that this excuses it, but it is a sad truth all the same. We stress out and take it out on those around us when our carefully laid out plans and life goals don't turn out the way we want. We try so hard to chase after a little control that we find ourselves spiraling out of control in questions of “what if's” and “what are going to do when.”

But who is the focus? When God allows us to see how not in control we are, often our response is something like, “Why me? Why is this happening to my loved ones?” Or we try to figure out and wonder, “What is God's plan for me?” Notice who the focus is. It's me. It's you. We are turned inward at ourselves. Why do we

get upset? It's because it affects me. It is up to "me" to try and fix it. And if I can't figure it or do something about it, then what is going to happen?

The fact is, the best way to steady yourself when you are in a spin is to focus on a point that is not spinning. In a world that is spiraling out of our control, there is only one who remains constant and does not change: God your Lord. And he's right where he always promises to be: his spoken word.

Look at Joseph. His soon-to-be wife is pregnant with not his child but is in fact conceived by the Holy Spirit. His fiancé was going to be mother to the promised child whose name would be Immanuel. That means this baby growing in Mary's womb, who has the hiccups, who Mary feels moving inside her, is true God from eternity who will save his people from their sins. And what does Joseph do? He believes it. He takes Mary to be his wife. When the child is born, he gives Mary's son the name Jesus.

How? How is Joseph able to do this? How does he take Mary to be his wife when all the facts point to the reasonable truth that she has not been faithful? How does he do this when his life goals and dreams are out the window? Life was not going to be anything like what he had planned. He has no idea what this is going to do to him in the future. His life is not in his hands. He's not in control. But Joseph puts his trust in the one who promises through an angel. Joseph trusts the God who does not lie and believes that if this child really is Immanuel—God with us—then everything is going to be okay.

For this child to be born would not come to make life the most comfortable now. The reason this child was conceived was not so that all my dreams and plans for what my life would look like would come to fruition. His name is Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. He doesn't come to teach us how to live a moral life. He doesn't come to make everything happen the way you would like it to. He doesn't come so that we might be able to control our lives more. He comes to save you from sin that enslaves you promising relief and always demanding more from you. He comes to free you from Satan's accusations that would condemn you straight to hell with him. He comes to break you free from the steely chains of death that is our due sentence for what we are by nature: sinners, not in control.

This Jesus, son of a virgin mother, comes to take your place as the sacrifice to take away the sins of the world—yours too. He comes to set you free from sin with his holy blood flowing through his veins. He's Jesus who preaches the Good News

into your ears today: “Your sin neither controls you nor will it follow you. I have thrown them into the deepest part of the sea. Your sins are forgiven and your debt is paid.” He’s Jesus your King who has destroyed the work of the devil and won the victory over death with his rising from the grave. He’s Jesus who lives and rules to guard and protect you from all those that would try and rob you of his gift of salvation and peace he brings to you today.

We can be sure of this because he is Immanuel—which means “God with us.” He’s not just with us to give us moral support and a cheerleader on the sideline. He is with us, always. He is God one of us, part of humanity. He is God in our flesh and blood. This Immanuel saved you from sin and won the right to be called your Savior with his sinless life, his innocent death, and his rising the dead. In him we have access to God and we need not be afraid. If God is with us that means God is for us and if God is for us, who can be against us? Devils, demons, sinful world can try as much as they want, nothing can come between you and Immanuel who is God with us. He’s Immanuel who is with us at the baptismal font where you died to sin and he raised you a new creation and child of God. He’s Immanuel who is with us and gives himself to us in his body and blood in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. He wants you to be near him so he hosts you at this special meal that assures your sins are forgiven and you taste and see that he’s not leaving you. He’s Immanuel, God with us. And this Immanuel who is with us continues to come to us in spoken word where God promises you: he’s in control. Since he’s given you his own Son, how will he not also take care of everything else?

And so, we go out to prepare for Christmas and live our lives in the freedom of knowing and trusting the one who is in control of all things. Set free from needing to be in control, go and do the work that God has set for you to do! See our neighbors and friends and family who are wrestling with the same issues as you and me and share this Good News with them. They need to hear it. That’s God’s plan for you: it’s to love and serve your neighbor. And even that he has under control and assures you that you are not alone. You have Immanuel, God with us. Amen.