

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²²Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

²³*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.*^[a]

(*Emmanuel* means "God with us.")

²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.

In 2007 I was admitted into Asbury Theological Seminary. I got married and we moved to Kentucky. Dreams were coming true. Dreams that I was even afraid to dream. It was too good to be true. Who would have imagined that I would be granted a full ride scholarship? How could it be that I got to marry the man that I love and he adores me? I could not believe that I was walking onto Asbury campus, one of the best seminaries. How did this girl, who thought she would not be able to finish high school, enroll in graduate school? How did this girl who got so lost in life now find herself in a totally new existence? I was in the clouds.

Everything was fantastic until I entered the classroom and saw the syllabus for the class. The syllabus that I had in my hands was for Introduction to Old Testament – just introduction. Suddenly I faced reality. The reality was crushing my dreams. I had to face the facts. I simply could not do it.

Mary had her dreams, her hopes and her vision of life. Suddenly her plans were crushed, the reality was she going to get pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She had to choose, to say yes to God's crazy plan or to stay with her old, safe, planned in advance life. She chose to say yes and continued to be a servant of God.

Today we meet Joseph. Joseph was a righteous man. Joseph did not eat unclean food. He didn't mix with the wrong people. He didn't keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra drachmas. He was a righteous man; that was his identity. Everybody knew this about him. Nobody invited Joseph over to have ham sandwiches with tax collectors and prostitutes. He was a descendent of David. Joseph

also has his life planned. He will have a wife and children and will live a happy life. Suddenly he is crushed by reality.



His fiancé is pregnant. One of the worst things that a man can think of - your woman pregnant but not from you. I am curious, what the man of today's world would do? What would you do if you were engaged to this beautiful young lady? The date is set, guests are invited, and you find out she is pregnant but not from you? What would you do? (I will ask a few men from the congregation).

I faced the reality that even though everything was going perfectly, I had to change my plans. I knew God was leading me and was making miracles in my life to be where I am, but the reality was I would not be able to pass the class. I could read in English. It would take about 20-30 minutes to read one page. We were expected to read 200 pages per day.

I could communicate in English, but to write a paper after you read a book?! I switched classes from the OT introduction to the Systematic Theology – not the best exchange – but I did not have many options. I cried. I wept. I will have to go home. I called my mom and told her I am sorry but I cannot do this. On top of all this I developed a toothache and had a root canal. We were poor and had no insurance.

Andrew said, “Let’s stay for three more weeks and if things will not get better we will go back to Lithuania.

From Joseph’s story we learn a second valuable thing about our lives. First, we have to admit when it looks like things are going badly. Secondly when it's gone from better to worse, we still have options. Like Joseph, we have to consider our options.

The most obvious option is to divorce loudly, as many do. In those days a woman pregnant out of wedlock was stoned to death. Certainly, no one would blame Joseph for leaving a betrothed spouse who had apparently been unfaithful. Matthew 5 says that even God allows for divorce under those conditions. Joseph could easily have said: "I give up. You've made your choices. You're going to feel this pain like I have." Tooth for tooth. Right?

If someone hurts you, do you naturally bless that person back? No, you say



something to hurt back or at least prove that he or she is wrong. Somebody betrays you or somebody unfriends you on Facebook. You at least treat the same way back, though they deserve worse.

The Bible says, "After [Joseph] had considered [his options], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid.'"

Again an angel starts the conversation by saying, "Do not be afraid."

Why did God make Joseph wait until after he had to think and struggle with all this stuff? Mary found out about Jesus through the angel. That's not how Joseph found out. Why couldn't an angel come to him ahead of time and explain everything and remove that anxiety? Maybe there were and there is a reason for us today. Why do we need to first struggle and to learn before we can make the best decision in a given situation?

A word study of the Hebrew Old Testament shows that being righteous means not only to act right, but to act with mercy. Joseph, being a righteous man, was trying to find a graceful way to care for Mary even all the plans had exploded.

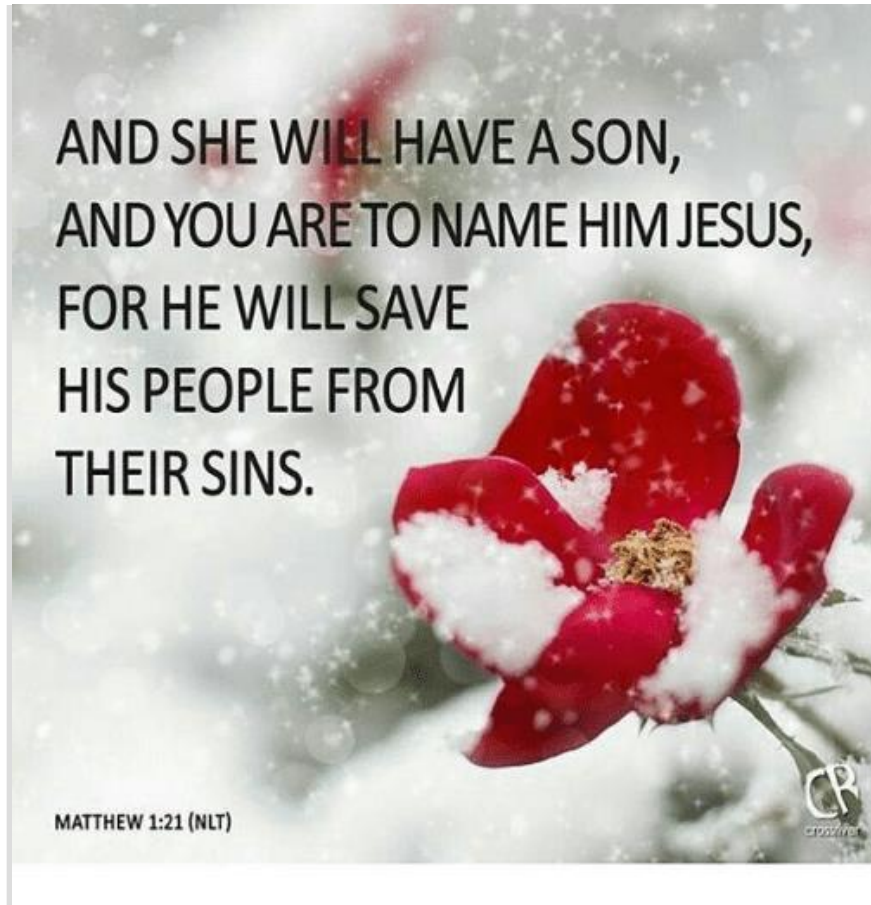
“Do not be afraid”. It is fear that paralyzes us. We get stuck and then we do not make the best decisions because we are afraid. What will people say? How I will live? I will definitely lose all my friends and my reputation. People will never believe it.



The next day, I went to my Systematic Theology class. I was lost beyond measure. I had no clue what professor is talking about. There was even more reading to do than in the previous class. I went to a prayer room and I prayed laying down on my face.

The next morning, I met with the Systematic Theology professor. His name is Larry Wood. I was waiting in the hallway and, oh, I prayed. When I went to his office and sat in the chair, I started to explain how hard and impossible it would be for me to finish his class. Dr. Wood said: “My class is not that important, sometimes it is actually boring. Let’s make a different syllabus for you. What theologians would you like to study? Any Europeans you know?” He said to me: “You are going to do great. And not only in my class. I know it. I will help you, because I want to see what God will do through you. You do not even have to come to my class. Just read as much as you can and come to tell me what you read.

Later I shared my story with a few other students. They could not believe that Dr. Wood would ever give that kind of chance to anybody.



“Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”.

It was enough for Joseph to have a dream. It was enough for him to say yes. It was enough for him to be obedient and believe the unbelievable. Maybe it was the words that he heard in the dream: “Jesus, who will save people from their sins”. I wonder, if he suddenly remembered the prophet Isaiah? "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14)?

There are no words recorded which were spoken by Joseph. We do have a record of his obedience. Joseph turned away from his plans and accepted God's plan. You cannot follow both. We see very clearly, that there is a time when we must yes to God's way and follow Him. These are very tough decisions: We have a different sense of timing than God.

Perhaps the most famous song of Frank Sinatra is "I Did It My Way? The truth is that we have to learn to do things God's way or we find ourselves in extreme difficulty. God's ways do not make sense to us but we must follow God's way to have life.

As we are obedient God can and does work in our lives. God brings good news and brings salvation to those who choose to believe unbelievable and accept God's will for their lives.

I finished seminary very well. I preached a sermon in Asbury chapel in my last semester. Mary became pregnant. Joseph married a pregnant girl. Is this what the people wanted and expected? Is this the expected plan of God's salvation? I bet not. How about you? Can you accept God's salvation in your life? Can you choose his unbelievable, unknown adventure instead of your planned and safe life? There is my way of Advent, and there is God's way of Advent. God says, I am with you. The biggest present I give you is my presence. Receive me. Accept me.