

THE ANGEL AND JOSEPH**MATTHEW 1:18-25**

We're looking at the Christmas story this year through the lens of the angelic appearances surrounding the birth of Jesus. The Bible has over 300 references to one or more angels. It's been suggested that most of us are unaware of angels because we haven't learned to look out for them. A comparison has been made between seeing hummingbirds and being aware of angels. When you first put up a hummingbird feeder, for example, you don't necessarily see hummers coming to the feeder at first. You sort of have to train your eyes to see them, because they're small, fast, and camouflaged. Once you do, however, you start to see them everywhere. Are angels like that? Perhaps few of us have experienced angels because we haven't learned to look for them. Do you remember what the Old Testament prophet, Elisha, said to his servant who was scared to death because they were surrounded by an enemy army? "Don't be afraid! ... For there are more on our side than on theirs!" Then Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes and let him see!' The LORD opened the young man's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire." (2 Kg. 6:16-17 NLT) In a book about angels, Martin Israel, wrote, "Eternity lies all round us and only a veil prevents us seeing it."

Angels were everywhere during the birth of Jesus! Angels were proclaiming, rebuking, encouraging, protecting, and, also, worshiping God. It's from the mouths of angels we learn all that's significant for us to know about Jesus' birth. We saw the impact of an angel's message on an over the hill priest named Zechariah back on December 3. An angelic encounter was transformative for a baffled young virgin named Mary. We read that story last week. Next week we'll see how it was life-changing for a group of common shepherds out in the fields surrounding the town of Bethlehem. But today we want to see how an angel's message forever changed the life of a confused fiancé named Joseph. Now, Gabriel was the name of the angel who gave God's message to Zechariah and Mary. It's reasonable to assume he was the one who also interacted with Joseph, but we can't be sure. The angel's specific identity is never revealed here in Matthew's account. But what the angel said to Joseph transformed his life. Here are a couple of truths about Joseph that occur to me. First of all, he was...

AN ORDINARY MAN IN AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT.

When I was growing up, my parents subscribed to "Readers' Digest" magazine. It was essential bathroom reading! For several years, "Readers' Digest" had a regular monthly feature article entitled "My Most Unforgettable Character." Each month a different person described an individual who had made an unforgettable impact on his or her life in some way. These unforgettable people were usually outstanding, dynamic, charismatic, or extraordinary men and women who had unique gifts or abilities that made them memorable to others. Who is the most unforgettable character in the story of Jesus' birth? Mary? The shepherds? The wise men? How about the most forgettable character? You could argue Joseph was the most forgettable character in the Christmas story.

Do you know what stands out to me about Joseph? He's so ordinary! He's not the sort of man who stood out in a crowd. The Bible doesn't give us much information about him. He's mentioned in these stories about Jesus' birth, of course, but then only one other time in the rest of the Bible. It's the time when Jesus was twelve years old and they all visited the Temple in Jerusalem together. After that you never read anything more about Joseph. Most Bible scholars believe Joseph had probably died before Jesus began His ministry.

Why do I say Joseph was ordinary? He was ordinary economically. The Bible says he was a carpenter by profession. He was a man comfortable with construction and tools - an ordinary, middle class working man. He was ordinary socially. Yes, he was a direct descendant of Israel's greatest king, David. But David had been king about a thousand years before Joseph lived and Joseph's family was no longer considered royal or noble. He came from a very ordinary town called Nazareth. There was nothing special or notable about Nazareth itself. Joseph was ordinary spiritually. He was neither a rabbi nor a priest. Instead, he appeared to be just a devout - but a very average, ordinary - follower of the Jewish faith. In every way most people make distinctions and evaluations about the status or importance of other people, Joseph was very ordinary.

Joseph was ordinary, but the events around him were extraordinary. He discovered his fiancé, Mary, was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. When he first found out, no one had told him yet the little life growing inside Mary's uterus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Now, while Joseph and Mary were as good as married from a legal point of view, they hadn't begun to live together as husband and wife yet according to Jewish custom. They hadn't slept together yet. Legally, Mary appeared to be guilty of adultery. Imagine how Joseph must have felt when he got news of Mary's pregnancy. No doubt he was shocked, angry, devastated, terribly hurt, and confused. It was probably the worst moment in his life up to that point in time.

Joseph could have taken a very different route than the one the Bible described. He could have demanded justice and gotten revenge for Mary's perceived unfaithfulness. The Old Testament is quite explicit. A woman in Mary's situation was to be taken out and stoned to death by the community. But because he still loved Mary deeply, Joseph couldn't bear the thought of her death or even public ridicule. Instead, he choose to divorce her as quietly as possible. Yes, of course, that would have been somewhat public and shameful, too. But at least Mary's life would be spared and perhaps over the years the pain of it all would diminish for both of them and their families.

Be honest. If it was your responsibility, would you have picked Joseph to be the stepfather of the Savior of the world? I doubt I would have. He was just so ordinary! But God has this interesting tendency of picking very ordinary people to accomplish His will in this world. After all, the Bible does say, "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?"

That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God.” (1 Cor. 1:26-29 MSG)

God enjoys choosing people who the rest of us consider to be sort of painfully average, mediocre or “a dime a dozen” types and then uses them to get His work done in this world often in some incredible ways. Don’t make the mistake of thinking every character in the Bible was some kind of superior, outstanding human being. Don’t assume that all or even most of them were spiritual heroes of some kind. Most of the characters in the Bible were very ordinary – and quite often – very flawed people. It’s what God did in them and through them that’s so extraordinary and wonderful.

I hope you find that truth encouraging today. I know I do! The fact is most of us here today are really quite ordinary. Most of us – if not all of us are – are economically, socially, and spiritually ordinary just like Joseph. You pick whatever category, scale, or measurement you want to use and I suggest most of us turn out to be about average. In our culture, we worship celebrities. We’ve been conditioned to think only very unique, talented, or gifted people should be noticed. We’re also taught to believe that only very unique, talented, or gifted people have anything of value to offer. As a pastor, I’ve discovered most followers of Jesus think they have nothing of value to offer God or other people. We doubt we can make a difference much of anywhere. Some of us conclude all we’re good for is to warm a pew on Sundays and throw a few dollars in the offering plate as it goes by. But Joseph is the hero for all of us ordinary folk out there. He reminds us of the fact God uses ordinary people to accomplish His purposes and plans. When God is in your life, He can use you to do extraordinary things for Him.

I appreciate a perspective Pastor Rick Warren provides about people in the Bible. He writes, “Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. That is quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in his service. He will use you too if you stop making excuses.” Maybe you should start celebrating how ordinary you are!

During World War 2, the Allies bombed German cities. Elmer Bendinger, an American airman, tells how his B-17 was barraged by Nazi anti-aircraft guns on one particular bombing run. On this specific occasion, his gas tanks took a direct hit. A large shell had pierced the plane’s fuel tank without touching off a massive explosion. How was that possible? Elmer’s pilot found out why. On the morning after the bombing raid, the pilot asked the crew chief for the shell as a souvenir of their unbelievable luck. The crew chief told the pilot that it wasn’t just one unexploded shell that had been found in the plane’s fuel tank. They had actually found eleven shells. Imagine – eleven unexploded bombs were found in that plane’s gas tank when only one would have been sufficient to blow them out of the sky! The shells were sent off to be defused. When

they opened the shells, they found no explosive charge in any of them. They were clean as a whistle and just as harmless. Empty – every one of them - except one. One shell contained a carefully rolled up piece of paper inside. It was a message written in the Czech language. They eventually found a translator. The note read, “This is all we can do for now.” Apparently, ordinary Czech citizens had been forced by the Nazis to make bombs so they made it their goal to make harmless bombs. Just because you’re an ordinary person, don’t ever think you can’t have an extraordinary impact. Joseph was an ordinary man caught up in an extraordinary event. But that’s not the whole story. What we also discover is that because of God’s grace, Joseph became ...

AN ORDINARY MAN WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY FAITH.

The Bible says this about Joseph, “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...” (Mt 1:20 NIV) I don’t know about you, but there’s a part of me that wants to say, “Lord, it’s about time!” I’d like to ask God, “Why didn’t you tell Joseph what was going to happen to Mary before it happened? Why did you allow him to go through all that emotional turmoil?” The Bible doesn’t answer those questions. I’ve also learned that it’s just the way God is sometimes. God rarely if ever tells you the reasons why you go through very difficult times in life before you go through them. More often than not months and even years can go by before you receive even a glimpse of why some crisis came into your life. And then sometimes you never know this side of Heaven why that job turned out so badly, or why your marriage failed, or why your kid screwed up so badly, or why a precious loved one died prematurely, or why you have a broken relationship with someone in your family, or why your health fails, or why your ability to remember and to reason grows dim as you age.

Have you discovered that about God? There’s little if any advance warning from Him when a crisis is coming your way. And then, He doesn’t always rush in immediately after a crisis pops up in your life. God is often in no hurry to put all the pieces of the puzzle back together immediately. Why is that? One reason is because God wants to develop something in you and me the Bible calls faith. And real faith involves the ability to keep on loving God, to keep on trusting God, to keep on obeying God, and to keep on living for God even when you don’t understand what is happening to you, why God allowed it, and why He doesn’t fix it.

I’ve never taken flying lessons, but I’ve heard some pilots develop the ability to fly a plane using just the cockpit instruments alone instead of relying on their vision. That’s a much higher level of proficiency and certification when it comes to flying. Why is that so important? Someday a pilot may find himself or herself in a storm and experience vertigo – the loss of your sense of equilibrium. When that happens to you, your senses can’t tell you anything reliable about where you’re going – up, down, straight, sideways. When that happens, you can no longer trust your senses. You must rely on your instruments. It’s easy to lose your spiritual and emotional equilibrium when the storms of life blow into your life and mine. You might wonder where God has gone. You might find yourself asking Him why He’s allowed this happen to you. That’s when it becomes essential to know and follow God’s Word – His primary instrument for giving us direction

in life. The Bible tells you God always loves you and will never forsake you despite what it looks and feels like when the storm is raging around you. When you continue to hold on to that truth right in the midst of life's storms – that's faith.

Don't you wonder what Joseph was thinking as the angel spoke to him? "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She hasn't been unfaithful to you, Joseph. The life conceived within her is by God Himself. Take Mary into your home, Joseph. Be a father to the child. Name Him "Jesus" which means "the Lord is salvation." He's going to save people from their sins. Mary's child is Emmanuel – "God with us" – just as the prophet Isaiah predicted so long ago."

It's impossible to get inside of Joseph and know what he thought or felt at that incredible moment. Can you imagine all his unanswered questions? Can you imagine his doubts, his concerns, and his fears? Can you imagine what it would have been like to try and explain this situation to his family and friends? But here's what you can know about Joseph. He was obedient to God. He obeyed the words of the angel and took Mary home. But Joseph didn't sleep with Mary until Jesus was born. What challenges me when I look at Joseph's faith was his simple obedience. He didn't understand everything, but he continued to obey God. Like Joseph, there will be times you will not understand what God is doing in your life either. That's OK. You need to keep on loving God, keep on trusting God, keep on obeying God and keep on living for Him, nevertheless. That's faith. God is far more interested in you and me obeying His will than understanding it. Faith means obeying God even when you don't understand Him.

Here's yet another example of a truth you find all through the Bible. Obedience results in blessing. When you obey God, God blesses your life. It's true - you can never earn God's grace. But in everyday life and living you can short circuit all the blessing God want to give you through your own self-destructive disobedience. What if Joseph had disobeyed what God told him to do through the angel? What if he'd said, "This is just too hard. Just too weird. The heck with you, Mr. Angel, and Mary! I'm outta here, God!" God would have found another way to accomplish His will. But Joseph would have missed forever the blessing of raising the King of kings and the Lord of lords from birth to adulthood. But because he obeyed God, Joseph will enjoy that blessing throughout all eternity and no one will ever be able to take it away from him. How does the wonderful old hymn put it? "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." If you think you're trusting God, but you don't obey Him, you'll fail. If you try to obey God, but don't trust Him, you'll also fail. You need to do both. Trust is one thing and obedience is another, but they go together. Hand in hand. When you trust and obey, blessing will inevitably follow.

Christian psychologist and author, Larry Crabb, tells a story from his childhood that helped him learn the importance of trusting in God even through times of adversity. One Saturday afternoon, three year old Larry decided he was a big boy and could use the bathroom without anyone's help. So he climbed the stairs, closed and locked the door behind him, and felt very self-sufficient. Then it was time to leave. Larry couldn't unlock the door. He tried with every ounce of his three-year-old strength, but he couldn't

do it. Larry panicked. The thought went through his head, "I might spend the rest of my life in this bathroom." Larry's parents—and likely the entire neighborhood—heard his desperate scream. "Are you okay?" Larry's mom shouted through the door she couldn't open from the outside. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?" "I can't unlock the door!" Larry yelled. "Get me out of here!" Larry was unaware of it at the time, but his dad raced down the stairs, ran to the garage to find the ladder, hauled it off the hooks, and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bedroom window. He pried it open, climbed into little Larry's prison, walked past him, turned the lock and opened the door. "Thanks, Dad," Larry said—and ran out to play.

Larry Crabb says that's how most of us think the Christian life is supposed to work. When I get stuck in a tight place, I should do all I can to free myself. When that doesn't work, I should pray. God should then show up. He hears my cry—"Get me out of here! I want to enjoy life again!"—and then He unlocks the door so I can receive the blessings I desire. Sometimes God does that. But the Christian life doesn't always work that way. What happens when He doesn't open the door we really wanted Him to open — when a marriage doesn't heal, when rebellious kids still rebel, when friends betray, when financial reversals threaten our comfortable way of life, when the prospect of terrorism looms, when health worsens despite much prayer, when loneliness intensifies and depression deepens? Yes, God does climb through the small window into my dark room, so to speak. But He doesn't always walk by me to turn the lock that I couldn't budge. Sometimes, instead, He sits down on the bathroom floor and says, "Come sit with Me!" It's strange, but sometimes God seems to think that simply being with me in my adversity is better than delivering me out of it. I rarely see it that way. "Get me out of here!" I scream. "If you love me, *unlock the door!*" There's a choice to be made. Yes, we can keep on asking Him to give us what we think will make us happy or to fix whatever has gone wrong. Or we can accept His invitation to sit with Him, for now, perhaps even in darkness, and seize the opportunity to know Him better and represent Him well in this difficult world.

Joseph may have been just an ordinary man, but there was nothing ordinary about his faith. He found himself in a locked room of very difficult circumstances. What should he do now? Should he put his trust in the Lord and this strange, angelic messenger? Or should he just bolt for the door? Joseph's faith turned out to be exceptional - truly extraordinary. I want that kind of faith on Christmas Day and every other day. I want to hold on to God even when I don't always understand everything He allows to come into my life. I want those tough moments in life to push me toward Him and not away from Him. I want to trust and obey knowing that's when the blessing comes. I want to keep on loving Him, keeping on obeying Him, keep on trusting Him and keep on living for Him until He comes and takes me home. How about you?