

Life's Twists and Turns



Purpose

To prepare us to respond with trust and courage to the unexpected changes that may occur in our lives when God calls us

Listen

The Scripture for this lesson is Matthew 1:17-25

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

20 But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Key Verse: When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife. (Matthew 1:24)

Look

Life never seems to go as we have planned. Unexpected events occur. Unanticipated factors arise. We have to learn to cope with circumstances that are not in our original plan. And how we resist change! We must stop, change our focus, alter our goals, and follow a different path. This is stressful. We do not like this.

The call of God in our lives, whenever or however it comes, is often disruptive. We have our plans made, our timetables laid out. Then God lays claim to our lives, and an agenda we had not counted on suddenly calls our plans into question. What do we do? Sometimes we ignore God's call. Other times we deny it. Sometimes, feeling generous, we try to work it into our schedule. There are even times when we resent God for the untimely interruption.

Joseph had a plan. He would marry Mary. He had to make a new plan when he learned she was pregnant. Then he had to alter that plan when an angel spoke to him in a dream and revealed God's will for his life. In the end, Joseph modeled for us how to respond to God's demands with trust and courage. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matthew 1:24).

Live

Jesus was born exactly when he should have been. The Gospel writer thought so anyway. Matthew tells us that fourteen generations passed from Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, to David, Israel's greatest king. Another fourteen generations took Judah's history from David to the Babylonian exile. Then another fourteen generations led from the Exile to the birth of the Messiah (Matthew 1:17). The symmetry of the genealogy indicated a plan that culminated in Jesus.

Mary's pregnancy, which led to the Messiah's incarnation, was a part of God's longstanding and elaborate plan. Yet it created a problem for Joseph. He had his plans too, and Mary's pregnancy called them into question. After all, he was betrothed to the woman who was now pregnant.

Marriage was typically a three-stage process in Mary and Joseph's culture. One became engaged. This sometimes happened in childhood, for it was arranged by the families of the future husband and wife. Then, farther along in life, the couple (or, more likely, their respective families) entered into a betrothal agreement involving an exchange of property. This stage was not yet marriage. Yet it was more than what we think of as an engagement, for breaking a betrothal demanded that certain legal procedures be followed. Finally, after a time of betrothal, came the marriage.

Joseph's plans changed when it became obvious that his betrothed was pregnant, for he knew he was not the father. So Joseph felt the need to make other plans. He would take legal steps to end the betrothal. At the time, he did not know that God's longstanding plan to bring the Messiah into the world involved him and Mary.

Joseph was like the batter who dug in at the plate expecting a fastball but was thrown a change-up instead. He was like the attorney with a thriving practice who, to the dismay of his family, heard a call to the ordained ministry. A three-year interruption in his career while he attended seminary, with a less lucrative profession afterwards, was not what they had anticipated.

Joseph's Old Testament namesake surely had made plans too, before his brothers cruelly sold him into slavery. Little did he know what great things God had in store for him (Genesis 45:7-8).

Unanticipated changes of any kind (even ones that are not so bad) create stress. Even when they are initiated by God, they interrupt our lives; sometimes they cause anxiety and anger.

When have your plans and the larger plans of God come into conflict?

Acting With Compassion

Even though he was placed in a difficult situation, Joseph responded with grace. He decided to divorce Mary; but "being a righteous man," he was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace" and "planned to dismiss her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). Joseph was not inclined to make matters worse than they already were.

The law was quite severe in matters of this kind. Deuteronomy 22:23-24 called for death by stoning for an engaged woman and a man (other than her betrothed) who had sexual intercourse with her. By this time in Israel's history, the punishment for crimes of this nature had been lessened in most cases. Mary's position was still precarious, however. By dismissing her quietly, Joseph was enhancing her safety and giving the biological father the opportunity to marry the woman and claim his child. Joseph was also saving Mary and her family from the shame of public exposure and ridicule. His righteousness was revealed in his kindness and compassion toward someone he thought had been unfaithful to him. He acted considerately toward someone whom justice would ordinarily condemn as unworthy of his consideration. Joseph's "righteousness" went beyond the law; in a sense, it went against it, for the law called for sin to be exposed and sinners publicly condemned.

Why did Joseph act this way? Why did he act compassionately toward Mary when she had treated him so contemptuously (he thought) and when the law gave him the opportunity to take his "pound of flesh" in revenge? Perhaps Joseph thought the punishment that could be meted out to Mary was out of proportion to the crime she had committed. He may have acted out of consideration for her family. They, too, would have participated in her public shame.

Or perhaps Joseph knew himself well enough to know what it was like to be tempted and to fail, or nearly to do so. Maybe he could look at Mary and say, "There but by the grace of God go I." Surely part of what it means to be a righteous person is to have an empathy born of self-examination, to realize that the border between a publicly exposed sinner and an otherwise well-respected person, whose private thoughts and deeds are not exposed to public view, may be very thin.

Whatever his motivations, whatever qualities constituted his "righteousness," Joseph's world was suddenly in turmoil. Joseph could mitigate the situation somewhat, but nothing he could do would be pleasant. His plans to marry this young woman and to have a family with her had to be abandoned.

Mary's pregnancy seemingly could not have come at a worse time for Joseph.

How do you understand Joseph's "righteousness"? How would you define what makes a person righteous? An Intervention

Before Joseph could put his plan into motion, God intervened. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and changed his plans yet again.

We read in the Bible that dreams are occasionally a means God uses to communicate with human beings. Certainly in the stories of Jacob and Joseph in the Old Testament (Genesis 28:10-22; 37:5-11; 40:1-41:36), dreams played a role in God's working out of the divine purpose. Today our remembered dreams may help us to clarify some of our needs, worries, and preoccupations. Reflection on them might help us to come to some conclusions about our state of mind. Dreams may yet be a potential avenue for God to communicate the divine will to us, although they should not be interpreted uncritically.

The main point of Joseph's dream was to tell him who the child was that Mary was bearing. He was a son who was to be named "Jesus" (Matthew 1:21). "Jesus" is the Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua." It refers to a deliverer or savior who acts in the power of God.

In the first century the Jewish people longed for deliverance from their enemies who occupied and dominated their land. Ever since the Babylonian exile, they had felt that they were bearing God's punishment for their sin. They awaited a deliverer who would initiate the messianic age, save them from the consequences of their sin, and restore them to glory.

Another name to be given to the child was "Emmanuel." "El" is a Hebrew word for "God." "Emmanu" means "with us." So the name means "God is with us." This was the profoundest hope of Israel.

Centuries before, God had traveled in a pillar of fire with the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. God was believed to have dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed in the warfare that led to the Babylonian exile. Before the Exile, God occasionally made his presence felt in moments of national crisis in order to avert tragedy. The text from Isaiah quoted in our Bible Lesson is from the time when Razon, the king of Syria, advanced against King Ahaz in Jerusalem (Isaiah 7:14). The birth of a child with the name "Immanuel" was to signal that God did not intend for Razon to achieve success at Judah's expense, for God would be with the nation.

Since the Exile, however, and even after the return of the Jews to their homeland, the people had felt God was absent. They longed for the time when God would return to Zion to dwell in the midst of his people (Isaiah 40:10-11). The name "Emmanuel" when applied to the child in Mary's womb was an indication that the time for which Isaiah and the entire nation had longed was about to arrive.

The birth of Mary's son was no small matter. It was the beginning of the fulfillment of hopes long held by the people of Israel. It was the opening scene of the climactic act in God's plan for the ages. A little disruption or emotional discomfort in the life of Joseph was a small price to pay for the great thing God was about to do.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is “Savior”? How are the two titles “Savior” and “Emmanuel” related?

Embracing Change

We know what Joseph did after he had the dream. “He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him” (Matthew 1:24). Do you ever wonder how Joseph felt about the decision he made?

I can imagine that Joseph felt a great deal of relief. He did not have to change his original plans after all. No one was to be put in danger of public exposure. No embarrassing rifts had to occur between two families. He could proceed with his plan to marry the woman who had been designated to be his wife. Best of all, the woman who was to be his life’s companion was thoroughly vindicated. She was revealed not to be an unfaithful woman, unworthy of a righteous man, but one whom God had chosen to be the mother of the Messiah.

That does not mean that Joseph found this decision easy to make. He could have reacted differently. Like you and me, Joseph could have discounted the dream as meaningless. He could have dismissed the dream as wishful thinking. He could have made up his mind not to be Mary’s fool and not to be duped by his nighttime imagination.

These things may well have crossed his mind, but he decided to act in accordance with the command delivered in the heavenly vision. He was willing to believe. Despite the possibility of other explanations for Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph chose to embrace the hopeful one, the one where no one, except possibly himself, would be hurt and the one wherein God might, in fact, be acting.

Before Joseph had the dream, he was described as a righteous man. He was compassionate and empathetic; he kept things in proportion. After the vision, he was willing to believe; he embraced the hopeful alternative. A person with a smaller or less generous spirit than Joseph’s might have resisted the heavenly vision.

Joseph, however, embraced the unexpected change that was coming into his life. He had the courage to risk being made to look foolish. Knowing that God had acted often in biblical history to bless barren women with children, was it so hard for him to believe that the creative power of God could bring a child into the world through a virgin? Joseph gave his betrothed the benefit of the doubt; he believed that God could and would use him and his wife to achieve the divine purpose.

So Joseph took Mary as his wife. Because he was a righteous man, he had no marital relations with her until after the birth of the child. Then, when the child was born, Joseph gave this little boy, who was not his biological child, the highest and most honorable name that could be given: “Savior.”

What is the relationship between Joseph’s righteousness and his obedience to the heavenly vision? Almighty God, whose counsels are so high and deep that no person can imagine them, yet are full of grace for all humanity, use us for the achievement of your purposes, even if that requires us to change our plans. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 From *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, by Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (Fortress Press, 1992); page 26.