

God with Us—At All Times in All places in All Circumstances

December 18, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: 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 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, 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" (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.

Sight and Sound Films has just come out with their first movie, "I Heard the Bells." It is a movie based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was considered America's greatest poet. The film is based on a dream or a vision that changed the life of Henry as well as his son, Charles.

Sometimes dreams can change people's lives. I don't know about you, but sometimes I have some pretty wacky dreams. I need to fire the scriptwriter!

Then again, there are those more rare times when a dream has had such a profound effect on me that it has changed my life. One of those times was a dream I had that God was calling on me to use my life to illustrate the verse, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). That's a long story that I am not going to get into right now. But it serves as a reminder that even in the dream world, where you might be tempted to say is God-forsaken, really is a realm that God is present and over which he has control. God truly is "with us"—at all times in all places in all circumstances—even in the dream world.

It is amazing how many times God speaks to his followers through dreams in the Bible. Joseph, son of Jacob, is famous for being a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams (Gen. 37). Daniel

interpreted dreams (Dan. 2:36). The prophet Joel spoke of the day that the Spirit will be poured out on the people, when sons and daughters will prophesy and old men dream dreams (Joel 2:28), a prophecy repeated in the book of Acts (Acts 2:17). God appeared to Jacob in a dream (Gen. 28:12), and to Solomon in a dream (1 Kings 3:5), to the wise men in a dream (Matt. 2:12). In today's Scripture reading, Joseph has a dream that changed his life. He would later have another dream, once the baby Jesus was born, to flee with him and Mary to Egypt (Matt. 2:13).

Dreams function in the Bible as a means to convey God's message to people. ...Based on Numbers 12:6, Jews believed that God communicated his will in dreams. In Matthew, dreams are used repeatedly to guide people (2:12–13, 22; 27:19). God used dreams in a special way during these key times. We can benefit spiritually from our dreams, but there is no certainty that they are authoritative messages from God.¹

Today's Scripture reading is about the birth of Jesus Christ from the perspective of Joseph. The gospel of Luke tells of the birth of Christ from the perspective of Mary. Whereas an angel appeared to Mary, Joseph is spoken to by God in a dream. The thing is, God had to directly intervene in Joseph's life or he would have made a terrible, if not understandable, mistake.

In the day and the culture of Joseph and Mary, a couple pledged to be married were betrothed to one another for a period of a year. The year of betrothal is similar to our time of engagement, where it was publicly made know that the couple would soon marry. For us that period of engagement may vary in length, from days to months or years.

Modern readers need to understand the traditions involved in ancient Jewish marriages. First, the two families would agree to the union and negotiate the betrothal, including a price for the bride that would be paid to the bride's father. Next, a public announcement would be made. At this point, the couple was "pledged." This is similar to engagement today, except that it was much more binding. At this point, even though the couple was not officially married, their relationship could be broken only through death or divorce. Sexual relations were not yet permitted. This second step lasted for a year. During that time, the couple would live separately, with their parents. This waiting period would demonstrate the bride's purity. If she were found to be pregnant during that time, the marriage could be annulled. Otherwise, the couple would be married and begin living together.

Because Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married, they had not yet had sexual relations (the meaning of the phrase "before they came together"). Yet she *was found to be with child*. Mary was pledged and pregnant, and Joseph knew that the child was not his own. Mary's apparent unfaithfulness carried a severe social stigma. According to Jewish civil law, Joseph had the right to divorce her. The law also explained that the penalty for unchastity was death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23–24), although this was rarely carried out at this time. That Mary was "found" to be pregnant indicates that she may not have immediately told Joseph, but had waited until her condition could be seen. This probably occurred after

¹ Bruce B. Barton, [Matthew](#), Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 16.

her return from visiting her pregnant cousin Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist) with whom she had stayed for three months (see Luke 1:39–56).²

Joseph had a difficult decision to make. Being a *righteous man*, he did not want to go against God's laws. To marry Mary would have been an admission of guilt when he was not guilty. To have a public divorce would have exposed Mary to *public disgrace*, and apparently Joseph's compassion would not allow him to expose her to public humiliation. Therefore, he chose the option to have a private divorce before two witnesses and *dismiss her quietly*. This way he could keep his reputation, while still showing compassion.

Evidently, Mary had not explained her visit from the angel to Joseph at this time. Joseph only resolved to dismiss Mary after her condition had become visible (1:18). And the angel's words in 1:20 indicate that Joseph did not know the Holy Spirit's role in Mary's pregnancy. So, Joseph thought he had only two options: divorce Mary publicly or dismiss her quietly, but God had another option for Joseph.

God often shows us that we have more options than we think. Although Joseph seemed to be doing the right thing by breaking the engagement, God helped him make the best decision. We should always seek God's wisdom, especially when our decisions affect others.³

In his dream Joseph was told by an angel that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. This was to fulfill a prophecy made by Isaiah (7:14) that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son, who will be called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

Note that Joseph did not awake from his sleep and say, "That was a wacky dream." He immediately knew it was from the Lord and did what the Lord commanded. He took Mary as his wife, but did not consummate the marriage until after she gave birth to a son, whom they named Jesus, which means, "God saves."

I don't know about you, but I find it of particular comfort that God is in control – at all times in all places in all circumstances. But it is not the kind of control where God simply manipulates us like pawns on a chessboard. No, it is the kind of control where God is in the thick of things, right beside us, right along with us, and – well, you could say, Christ is within us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us – at all times in all places in all circumstances. Even in our dream world. Even in this world, where the headlines have the potential to terrify us, or have us shaking our heads and wonder what in the world is the world coming to. I find myself saying often, at least once per

² Bruce B. Barton, [Matthew](#), Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 13–14.

³ Bruce B. Barton, [Matthew](#), Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 15.

day, "Lord, Jesus, come soon," because the condition of this world is getting so far from what God intends for it.

What does it mean for you that God is with you – at all times in all places in all circumstances? Does that give you comfort and strength, knowing that you are not "in it," whatever "it" is, alone? God loves you. He loves you so much that he sent to us his Son Jesus, to be born among us as the one who saves, for he saves us from our sins, so that we might be able to be with God for all eternity. Not because we deserve it but because God has had mercy upon us, and receives us into his kingdom as an act of grace. Thanks be to God that God is with us. Allow that to give you strength, wisdom and guidance for whatever lies ahead. Amen.