

## **God is Really With Us**

Matthew 1:18-25

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December 22, 2019

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

My favorite Christmas movie is It’s A Wonderful Life featuring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. The reason I love this movie is because of its main character, George Bailey. From the time he was a child, George was constantly making sacrifices for others, trying so hard to do the right thing. He gives up his college earnings so his younger brother can go instead. He gives up his honeymoon money to save the building and loan from the scare of the stock market crashing. I find myself encouraged by George’s self-sacrificial love and want to be more like him.

But doing the right thing is not always easy or rewarding. By the end of the movie, after doing all these wonderful deeds for others, George Bailey is not filled with happiness and cheer but rather ends up stuck in a devastating situation. George's forgetful uncle has lost a large deposit from his business on his way to the bank. This means George will lose his business and even possibly go to jail for fraud. In George's mind, he has two options. Stay and go to jail, leaving his family in the poor house or take his life and maybe his family will get some money from his life insurance policy. As the bad guy of the film reminds him, "You're worth more dead than alive." Sometimes despite our best efforts, we get stuck by ourselves, trying to do the right thing with no good options around us.

Like George Bailey, our Bible story today features Joseph, a man trying his best. In the previous 18 verses before our scripture text this morning, there has been a long string of names showing that Joseph's genealogy goes directly back to the famous King David. The text itself, tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, meaning he works hard to do the right thing for himself and others.

So you can imagine what a shock he must have had when he found out that Mary, the woman he was engaged to, was pregnant! It seemed no matter what way he looked at it, which I think any of us would come to the same conclusion, that Mary had been unfaithful. This left Joseph with only two choices in his mind. He could publicly declare the break in the engagement leading to a trial which would have ultimately ended with Mary being stoned to death, or he could divorce her quietly to try and avoid public shame for both of them. Joseph did not want to do either of these things but because of Mary's pregnancy, he felt alone and stuck having to make the hard decision.

But this is where God shows up. When George and Joseph are alone and stuck trying to do the right thing, with options that neither of them want to take, they both receive visits from angels! In *It's A Wonderful Life*, as George is standing on a bridge contemplating taking his life, an angel by the name of Clarence, appears to George. Clarence works to show George the beautiful things that are happening in his life and the many reasons he has to live. The angel does not solve all of George's problems but instead provides hope in a dark time.

For Joseph, an angel appears in a dream to tell him that Mary did not cheat on him but rather that she is bearing a child born from the Holy Spirit and, what is

more, this child is going to save people from their sins! The angel even goes on to say that this baby will be the messiah and savior that the nation of Israel has been longing for. This baby will be Emmanuel, proving God's presence with us. This however, does not solve all his problems, especially with public opinion, but the angel provides hope to Joseph in his time of trouble.

Are there places in your life where you feel alone or stuck, with no hope, filled with despair, or just can't see a way forward? Do you have a broken relationship with a family member that never seems to get better? Have you lost a loved one and just can't find the motivation to get up and keep moving? Are you trying to be eco-friendly and care for our earth in a society that covers everything in plastic? The good news from our passage today is that God is really with us. Emmanuel, God with us, is true. This is a promise fulfilled and constantly being lived out in our lives. We may be stuck. We may be lost. We may feel like giving up. But God promises to be there for us, providing hope and encouragement in the dark.

It's a Wonderful Life ends not by returning or finding the lost funds. The problem does not disappear. But George's community, the people he has cared for and loved for so many years, despite their general poverty start to give and give and give. This generosity is so surprising that it gave George a third option. Even when it seemed like there was no hope, God's presence was there and available to George and his family through the love and care of his community.

Joseph, like George Bailey, ends up following the third path that the angel provides. He decides that he will not divorce Mary, choosing to stay. Joseph will legally adopt Jesus as his own. Mary and Joseph both received visions from God that provided hope, but still had very difficult tasks ahead of them. Thankfully, and this is my hope, they had each other to care and support, to encourage and provide in the midst of the struggle and despair. God gives us people, a community of faith, that act as angels, messengers of God, to share hope with us. We are not alone. God is with us.

So this Christmas season, do not give up hope. Do not let despair win. God promises to be with us through the dark. That the community of faith that you live in will be walking with you being the hands and feet of our living God. So turn to

your church, your family, your loved ones, because in them you may just find the truth of Emmanuel, God with us, this Christmas season.