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*What do you want for Christmas, Joseph?*  
*My Divorce!*  
Matthew 1:18-25

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. I did... family, pinochle, a great football game, a table full of earth-tone foods. I love earth-tone foods! Except for pumpkin pie... hate it! Cyndi was incredible; like a gastronomical choreographer, everything out of the oven on time and in the right order. Mom baked four of her famous pies. And I was Turkey Boy. My task was to cook the turkey in the deep-fat fryer. (And may I say, you could deep fat fry my shoe, and I would like it. It is the ultimate food preparation!)

My nephew Duncan used the opportunity ask each of us the same question: "What do you want for Christmas?" Cooper wants an F150 truck (Yeah, right.) Cyndi wants See's Nuts and Chews. I want a tiny Master Card bill in January. How about you? How many of you know what you want for Christmas?

This Advent we are going to look at five characters in the Christmas story and ask them the same question. This morning, it is Joseph... the silent man who, by his courage and obedience saved the savior of the world.

<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>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.

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

<sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew's Christmas story starts with an apparent act of deep betrayal. Joseph was a young craftsman from a tiny Galilee called Nazareth. He had a reputation as an honest, devout, hardworking young man... a great catch. For years, the whole town had known that Joseph's parents had arranged a marriage with the parents of a young girl named Mary. There was no such thing as marrying for love in those days. You married who your parents picked out for you, and you grew into love. (Speaking as a dad, I'm all for arranged marriages!) While Joseph and Mary were kids, the two dads came together and drew up a binding contract. It even included the bride-price, the amount of dowry that the groom's parents would pay to the bride's parents.

And then, they waited until the children were older... but not very. At that time, people usually married in their teens; in the case of the bride, as young as 14 or 15. But as far as society was concerned, if the kids were betrothed, they were already married! Betrothal was more than engagement, it was marriage in every way—except for the sex—and to break a betrothal wasn't just a matter of giving back the ring... it required a divorce.

So when Mary—Joseph's betrothed... the girl promised to him for years—came to him with news that she was pregnant, can you imagine the heartbreak? Some of you can! You have experienced that ultimate betrayal... stumbled upon emails or phone messages or even caught them together. It is such a wounding, humiliating act of betrayal that you never get over it completely, do you?

We live in a culture where sex before marriage—where living together—is no big deal. Fewer and fewer kids come to me to get married and proudly declare they are still virgins. But even in our culture where sexual expression is virtually unrestrained—when we have lost our ability to blush—sexual infidelity is still condemned... for now.

So can you imagine how the close knit community of Nazareth would receive the news of Mary's apparent infidelity? What she did was considered, not just a betrayal of Joseph, but a violation of deeply-held cultural values. It was such a violation, that it carried the death penalty. If she was reported, Mary would be dragged to a precipice by the elders, thrown off the cliff, and as she lay below, they would drop rocks on her to finish the job. That was the punishment. Joseph's honor had been violated by this betrayal, and he had every right to demand retribution.

Of course, Mary denied it. She had some cockamamie story about an angel telling her that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Yeah, right. Who could believe such a thing? Mary had always seemed so virtuous, but as much as Joseph might have wanted to believe her the story was so far-fetched. Obviously, she was not only an adulteress; she was a liar, too. She deserved to die for her betrayal.

But Joseph loved her. This was the woman he planned to spend his life with. He had always respected her. He may have the right to demand her death, but as hurt and angry as he was he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was a good, righteous man. So, broken-hearted Joseph decided to divorce Mary; quietly, he would make the arrangement and sign the papers. She could sneak away and have the baby. She could hide her shame and he would endure his. But sooner or later, the whispers would stop and his parents could arrange for another bride... and maybe this one would work out better and he could get on with his life. A life without that embarrassment named Mary.

And really, divorce could hardly have been easier. If a man in Jesus' time decided he didn't want to be married anymore, all he had to do was say to his wife three times, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you" and they were divorced. Don't like the wrinkles that are appearing on her face? "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you." Don't find her frisky enough in bed? "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you." She uses too much salt in her cooking? "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you."

When Jesus was a grown man, he would condemn divorce as a violation of a covenant made before God. But now, Jesus was a fetus inside the woman that Joseph had decided to divorce. He didn't want her killed; didn't want to humiliate her... just slip down to Las Vegas, get a quickie divorce, and get on with his life. It seemed reasonable... but not to God.

Even though society would agree—even though Joseph was within his rights to get a quickie divorce—God had something else in mind... something radical and counter-cultural and unbelievable. God was going to take apparent betrayal and humiliation and redeem it. He would draw them together and restore their covenant to each other and bless their union in a way that would change eternity.

One night, Joseph fell asleep and was visited by an angel: "Don't be afraid to take this girl as your wife. Everything she told you is true. She has been faithful to you. She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. You will marry her, you will take this child as your own and you will name him Jesus [which means, 'Yahweh saves'] for he will save his people from their sins." Can you imagine Joseph's relief? When he awoke, he rushed to Mary's house, told her the story and they continued their plans for life together.

As I said, the Christmas story starts with the deepest betrayal a human being can experience. What did Joseph want for Christmas? A divorce... he wanted to quietly set aside his marriage and get on with his life. I wonder how many here this morning, in their heart of hearts, want the same thing?

Beloved, we live in a culture of quick and quiet divorce. Maybe not as easy as saying, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you...", but almost! What is different is this: Joseph and Mary lived in community that disapproved of divorce!

Theirs was a society built upon the sacred covenant of marriage and family... a society that expected people to keep their wedding vows and endure hard times and spend their whole lives together. Our community expects no such thing. Our culture says, "If it doesn't work out, too bad. Get divorced and try again."

And what is more tragic, even the Church in America treats divorce as a do-over. Our own church has been rocked by divorce in this last year. It is so prevalent, so shocking and disappointing, that if you are struggling in your own marriage, you might just be tempted to toss in the towel; give up. Get a divorce like everyone else.

Well, I want to give you hope. I want to encourage you, especially if your marriage is struggling right now. There is a simple but profound truth in Joseph's story that could transform your struggling marriage. Here it is: listen to God's voice on this and obey him. If your marriage is struggling, there will be lots of voices urging you to chuck it in and start over... voices on TV, voices of friends, voices of attorneys, maybe even supposedly Christian voices. Certainly, the voice inside your own head will be saying, "This is hard, it seems hopeless, you will never be happy, you deserve more." Could I ask you, please try to shut out those voices and listen instead to the only voice that matters... the voice of the One who formed your marriage in the first place and the only One who can redeem your marriage and who longs to do so!

There may be times when God does say, "I want you out of that marriage; it is abusive and unsafe." Although, that language has been cheapened and made meaningless by overuse. But generally, God has already given his opinion on the subject. In Malachi 2:16, God says, "I hate divorce." When you took your vows before God, he sealed you in a relationship He intended would last a lifetime. God longs for you to have a marriage that doesn't just survive, but thrives. And the most important thing you can do for your struggling marriage is to listen for God's voice—before anyone else—and believe him and obey him. Like Joseph did: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."

Did that mean that it would be suddenly easy? No. Did that mean an end to the whispers of accusation? No. Did that mean there would never be rough times? I guarantee you, as Joseph fled with his family to Egypt, it was rough. But because he listened, obeyed and was committed to his marriage, it placed him right in the heart of God's will for their life together and God redeemed what seemed certain to be an absolute disaster. That's what God can do if we are willing to silence the voices of quick and quiet divorce.

But you might reply, "I've heard that Christians divorce at the same rate as non-Christians. It doesn't seem to make any difference whether you listen to God or not." Have you ever heard that? I know you have, because you heard it from me. Well, I was wrong. I looked into it more carefully and here is the statistical truth: According to a book by a Harvard-trained researcher, *The Surprising Secrets of*

*Highly Happy Marriages*, Christian couples who practice their faith together are 50% less likely to get a divorce than non-Christians. 50%!

Notice, I say “those who practice their faith.” Nominal Christians—the ones who claim to be disciples, but never read the Word, pray, attend church, give or serve Christ in any way—actually appear to have a higher than average divorce rate. Perhaps because they are used to pretending—pretending that they are followers of Jesus, pretending that they are church members, pretending that they have a happy marriage, and finally, they get tired of pretending. But the couples who really live out their Christian faith—in other words, those who really listen for God’s voice together and do what He tells them to do—are more than twice as likely to have a life-long, happy marriage.

There is no such thing as a quiet divorce. No matter how civilly you try to go about it, the pain and regret and brokenness will cry out in your life and in the lives of your children for the rest of your lives. You may have good reason to want to end your marriage. You may rightly feel betrayed or abandoned. Joseph certainly had reason to “quietly” divorce Mary. And it must have seemed impossible to him that his present circumstances could turn out to be anything but disastrous. And yet, he chose to listen to God and believe that God could redeem an impossible, scandalous situation and use it for his perfect purposes.

God still can. I am here to tell you that a Christ-centered marriage, where each partner champions the other, is the most wonderful, life-giving gift in the world. And there are couples around this sanctuary who have been married 40, 50, 60, 70 years... who would say the same thing. Right, Ray and Patty Payne?

I don’t want this to be a word of condemnation. For those who have endured the pain of divorce, the gospel says this: divorce is not the unforgiveable sin. God can forgive and heal and redeem the life of any person and couple who are truly repentant and desire to hear Him and obey Him. But to those who are teetering—who, like Joseph, are toying with the idea of divorce because they consider it the panacea for their problems—I beg you, listen for the voice of God! Confess; seek forgiveness; get counseling; come to our marriage conference in January. Don’t give up! God’s desire is not just that your marriage would limp along but that your marriage and your life would thrive! And he can do this seemingly impossible thing, even if no one else can.

But I wonder if this story doesn’t take us beyond the topic of marriage? Joseph thought he had only two options: have Mary murdered or “quietly” divorce her. He put all his hopes in the latter and decided to live the rest of his life the best he could under the circumstances. But he was limiting God in the process. Joseph thought he had to just “get by” for the rest of his days; God had so much more in store for him.

What if in the devastating, broken places of our lives, God has more in store for us... whether in our marriages or anything else? What if, by taking the easy way—by doing the practical thing that society urges—we are actually resigning ourselves to a lesser life? What would happen if we expected God to show up and reveal more possibilities than we ever dreamed of? What if the second-rate thing we're willing to settle for isn't even close to the blessing that God desires for us?

Christmas started with heartbreak and ended in redemption. God wants to do the same thing for you in every part of your life. Listen for his voice!

### **Sermon Questions**

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. The Bible never includes a single word spoken by Joseph. He listens, he dreams...but we never hear him speak. If he could, what do you think he would say about his situation?
  2. Have you ever been betrayed, particularly in love? If you are able and willing, can you share that story? How did God redeem that loss?
  3. Joseph's way "out" was not God's way. Can you think of a time when your way "out" wasn't God's way either? What happened?