

The Promise of Christmas
Matthew 1:18-25
Advent 1

We've all heard the expression "rising to the occasion"... And some of us have had to do just that from time to time. It's precisely what we see Joseph doing in our lesson for today. With the help of God, Joseph rises to a most difficult occasion. Remember his story with me.

Joseph was a carpenter in Nazareth, engaged to a young girl named Mary, who he learns is pregnant... before they were together, before he knew her as his wife. Joseph was crushed, of course, but loved Mary... and didn't want to hurt her or ridicule her or embarrass her.

As he agonized over how to handle this situation, he turned to God... wanting so much to do God's will. And in the midst of his agonizing, the Spirit of God spoke to him in a dramatic way, saying, "Joseph, don't be afraid. Go ahead and take Mary for your wife. Your love for each other is unique and special. The Spirit is with her bringing a new life. The child is of God. It is God's will that she bear a Son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save people from their sins."

Now, when you stop to think about it, you can't help but be inspired by the bold faith of this man called Joseph. As a matter of fact, I think way too little attention has been given to Joseph's part in the gospel story. His faith, his sensitivity, his kindness, his compassion, and his obedience to the will of God have had a far greater impact on Christian thought and lifestyle than most of us realize.

But, how did Joseph do it? What gave him the poise, the resolve, the confidence, the strength, to rise to that occasion so magnificently? Well, I think the answer is found in one word in our passage this morning from Matthew 1. One word that underscores the greatest promise in the Bible, the promise of Christmas. And that word is Emmanuel which means "God is with us."

This is what Christmas is about. This is what Jesus is about. "Behold, a virgin shall bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'" Now, the impact of this promise is incredible. When you believe that "God is with us," when you accept that, when you claim that promise, it will absolutely change your life!

That's what happened to Joseph at the first Christmas... and it can happen for you and me right here and right now... and the strength that comes from this amazing promise can empower us to rise to any occasion. Let me show you what I mean by bringing this closer to home.

First of all, **God is with us to give us comfort.** Now, I am basically by nature a pessimist, but by faith an optimist. My nature is to see the glass half empty but my faith

forces me to see it half-full. And I don't need to remind you that 2021 has been a challenging year.

We continued navigating the changing landscape of COVID-19 and the delta variant and masking or not masking, and getting shots or not getting shots; there was civil unrest in cities large and small; there was a deep freeze that affected Texas; political turmoil in New York; the split of Kim Kardashian and Kenya West (ok, I slipped that in there to see if you're still with me...). By any measurement 2021 has been challenging.

We need a good word this morning, a word of comfort... and our lesson provides that for us - Emmanuel. That's the good news... God is with us... and God will see us through. God will bring us out of the valley to the mountaintop on the other side.

The word "comfort" was created by combining two Latin words... *cum* which means "with" and *fortis* which means "strength"... so the word "comfort" literally means "with strength." Those who are comforted are those who are given strength.

Someone once expressed it well like this: "God always gives us the strength we need at the time we need it. He doesn't give it to us in advance because if He did, we would take the credit."

Joseph needed comfort that day and God appeared giving the strength he needed, turning what seemed at the time like the worst day of Joseph's life into what he realized later was the best day of his life. Joseph grabbed hold of that promise... God is with us! So first, God is with us to give us comfort.

Second, **God is with us to give us courage.** In a philosophy class at Rice University, the professor told students to bring blue books for a test the next day. On test day, the professor said to the class, "Your test today is to write an essay on the topic, "What Is Courage?" The students began to write furiously. All, that is, except one young man.

He sat there quietly, thinking deeply for five minutes. Then took his pen, wrote the title, "What Is Courage?" at the top of the page; and wrote down two words... just two words which comprised his entire essay. Then he got up, walked down front, turned in his test, and walked out of the classroom.

Most of the students took the full hour and filled all the pages of their blue books writing on the subject "What Is Courage?" That evening the professor telephoned the author of the two word essay... and informed him that he would get an A+ on the test... and that he would like to get to know the student better. The professor congratulated him and hung up. (PAUSE...)

I bet you're trying to figure out what those two words were... as was I when I first heard this story. Well, the two words the student wrote in answer to the question "What Is Courage?" were these: "THIS IS." See what he did there? He didn't define courage. He demonstrated it. He acted it out.

That's one kind of courage, but there is another kind that's even better...It's the courage that comes from knowing Emmanuel - God is with you. That's what Joseph knew at the first Christmas.

He was in a tough spot. He knew that the world in which he lived would ridicule him, criticize him, laugh at him, make cruel jokes about him... but after his encounter with the angel, he knew that God was with him.

So, he stood tall and said to the world, you want to know what courage is, this is! And rising above social pressure, he married Mary and when she gave birth to a baby boy, Joseph named him Jesus... just as God told him to do. Emmanuel... God with us, giving us comfort and courage.

THIRD, God is with us giving us a commission. Margaret Deemy wrote a poem called "The Greatest Words."

"'Tis sweet to hear 'I love you'
Beneath a giggling moon.
'Tis fun to hear, 'You dance well'
To a lilting, swinging tune.
'Tis great to be proposed to
And whisper low, 'I do'
But the greatest words in all the world are
'I've got a job for you!'"

This is one of God's greatest promises and greatest gifts to us. He says, "I've got a job for you. There's something special I want you to do. Take up the torch. Take up this ministry."

God came and gave Joseph a special job... to be the earthly father of Jesus. And Joseph must have done that job well because when Jesus grew up and went out to do his ministry... when Jesus wanted to say the best and highest thing He could think of about God, He said, "God is like a loving parent. God is like an understanding father."

And while Jesus was talking about God, I'm convinced he was thinking about Joseph, feeling Joseph's love, basking in Joseph's grace and compassion, his mercy and kindness. Jesus experienced Joseph's strong gentle spirit.

And then Jesus said, "God is like that! A loving parent, who cares for his children like Joseph cares for ME." Joseph did his job well because He knew God had called him to do it... and He also knew the great promise of Christmas, a promise you and I can claim today... EMMANUEL - GOD IS WITH US.