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SERMON TITLE: Acts of Love: Joseph's Story
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:18-25
DATE: December 12, 2021 ADVENT THREE
 Online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

Read also Isaiah 11:1-5. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

It seemed like a distant, vague memory that Israel had once experienced the good life. They had peace. They had prosperity. They had their own land, king, and government. King David was a wonderful king. He prayed for God's favor for his nation and God gave it. King David was beloved. But after he died, within one generation the nation was in trouble.

After his son Solomon's rule, the kingdom was torn from Solomon's son Rehoboam. The United Monarchy became a divided kingdom—two nations where there should have been one; faith lost, pagan religious practices and idol worship took hold. Even though prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and Micah rose up, bad kings proliferated. Unbelief was relentless. Enemies pressed in. Assyria, Babylonia, Persia. Now Rome. The people were scattered; the temple was destroyed. Where did all that prosperity and independence go? Where were the kings who cared? Why did God let this happen?

After a long time, nothing had changed. Jerusalem was a pile of rubble. Having no center, people lost touch. When the temple was finally rebuilt many people wept because it was small—of little consequence compared to Solomon's temple, and besides that, those "others" ruled. Their kings were named Caesar.

Hope seemed so fragile. Did anyone care about tiny Israel?

But pick up a Bible and read this prophecy from the 700s B.C.:

"Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root" Isaiah 11:1.

Year after year the people read this prophecy. Yes, God cares! Even though God's children took a hit and they were pruned, new life would come. Isaiah also wrote:

"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us" (9:6).

This Child would be Jesus. But this would certainly not be what Joseph would expect when he heard his betrothed was expecting a baby. Joseph was from the line of Judah, the expected Messiah, but that's like you and I believing those so-called prophets that stand on the street corner shouting the world is going to end on a certain date! Let's hear Joseph's story.

READ Matthew 1:18-19

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

When a young married couple adds a baby into the mix, it can be stressful. It can be scary because everything changes. Now imagine what it was like for Joseph to find out that Mary was pregnant and the wedding had not yet taken place! He had been honorable and so had she. But this was a lot to cope with. Still, he loved Mary. That was evident by the fact that he still wanted to help her.

In those days, certain relational protocol ranked as highly important in the culture and in Israel's religion. It was a religion of the law—remember the woman caught in adultery? Remember how the scribes and Pharisees said: "Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women" (John 8:3-5).

Sexual mores were highly reinforced and so Mary might have been stoned for her pregnancy.

But Joseph was a good man. Joseph was a righteous man. Joseph treated Mary with grace, even though evidence supported that she was not faithful to him. Where did Joseph get such faith in that dark time in Israel's history when most of the culture had abandoned the faith?

Even though this intertestamental time was dark and quiet in terms of no prophets, things were still going on. Not everyone had abandoned the Lord. There were those faithful families who were teaching their children to follow the Lord. The people still had the Scriptures and perhaps Joseph's family had a One-Year Bible, because he was righteous and good.

Joseph did not want to live by the law alone. He lived by grace.

Imagine trying to wrap your mind around being told by your fiancé that the Holy Spirit impregnated you! That's not going to fly then or today! So . . . (continue story)

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's

message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" (vs. 20-23)

It would take an act of God for Joseph to believe this, so *God acted!*

Sometimes God interjects himself through angels or dreams or other people to accomplish God's plan. That is why it is so important that you step up in someone's life to help them see the spiritual side of things. How do you think people learn that God sees us and helps us?

You are that light. You bring that needed love.

Sometimes life's pain hits you hard, and you need someone to interpret things from a spiritual aspect. You need someone to illumine the Spirit. It is a give and take equation. Sometimes you have the need. *Sometimes you fulfill the need.*

The angel Gabriel spoke to Mary earlier. Then Elizabeth, her aunt, encouraged her so she would have the support she needed to bear this baby and to tell Joseph.

Joseph's family had evidently done the same for him, for he already had it in his mind to be good to Mary. But now he would stick with her and bear the disgrace alongside her.

Joseph's ancestors had certain traits. For example, Judah saved his brother, Joseph's life, by insisting his other brothers not kill Joseph. He took responsibility for abusing Tamar, his daughter-in-law. These are Mary and Joseph's predecessors, listed in Jesus' genealogy.

This family valued righteousness, justice, truth, and grace.

What does your family value? What spiritual assets do you have to help your children and grandchildren act in love?

Joseph's life was filled with acts of love. Let's continue the story:

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. (vs. 24-25)

So Joseph was righteous, just, and faithful. He was also the father Jesus would need, as God wanted Jesus to grow up in a home with both a mother and a father.

This is a good man to follow. He stayed the course. He fulfilled his call. God helped him through dreams to do the right thing and really "see" God's plan.

Again not too long afterward, another dream would awaken Joseph with a message to take his young family and flee to Egypt to save Jesus' life.

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother. Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod's death (Mt 2:13-15).

And he listened, because he had learned to "see" spiritually. That vision helped him to take these acts of love again and again.

This is true faith—to be there for your family; to listen for God's voice; to make good decisions and to lead your family with love and grace.

What kind of person do you want to be? We have some lovely role models here.

Joseph may not have been Jesus' birth father, but he was indeed his father. For this baby would not just belong to Mary, but would be the baby who belonged to him, and also to all of us because we all need to be saved.

"You shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The prophet said *they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us."*

God is with you in every circumstance you encounter. May God help you to be faithful like Joseph. If you do, you will impact everyone around you.

AMEN