

Matthew 1:18-25

The season of Christmas is the time for stories. They're everywhere. Frosty, Rudolf, A Christmas Carol with Ebenezer Scrooge, Twas the Night Before Christmas. Some of you remember the Berenstain Bear's Christmas Special, or even Yogi Bear's Christmas Caper. If we put our heads together, we could come up with a hundred or more different Christmas stories. And just like you, I enjoy many of these stories. But in the final analysis only one story really matters--"*And it came to pass that in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...*" St. Luke tells a Christmas story that leaves all the other stories behind. St. Matthew also focuses in on the heart of Christmas--the Baby Jesus. But even Matthew does not bother with the details of the swaddling clothes, the manger, the shepherds, the angelic choir. Matthew tells us about Joseph. He brings Joseph into the story.

Now Matthew 1:18-25, our text for today, is an important passage. It testifies clearly that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. It tells the Gospel beautifully in verse 21: "*She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" But nonetheless, Joseph, as part of the story of Christmas, is not an essential character. Jesus is conceived within Mary completely apart from his involvement. He's not the father. Jesus has no human father. Oh, he's there to support Mary, and certainly to help with the birthing process. But strictly speaking, Joseph is unnecessary. Mary is essential to the story of Christmas, but had Joseph not been in the picture, Christmas would have taken place anyway. Joseph is just...there. It's hard to picture the manger scene without him. We'll take out the sheep and the cattle if we have to, but not Joseph. If you purchased a nativity set from the store and discovered the Joseph figurine to be missing, you would take it back. Although unnecessary, Joseph belongs in the story of Christmas.

Just like you. If you and I had never been born, Christmas would have happened anyway. We did not cause Jesus to be born, in the way that Joseph did not cause it. It came to pass completely apart from our involvement. And yet, as with Joseph, God has drawn you into the story. "*He will save His people from their sins,*" the angel said to Joseph. That's you. You are "*His people.*" You may be unnecessary when it comes to the Christmas story, but you are, nonetheless, an essential part of the story because you are the reason why Jesus was born.

Today Christmas is under attack even more fiercely than just a few years ago. School children are forced to sing Silent Night with all references to Jesus and the Virgin Mary stripped out of the carol. In the public arena even saying the word "Christmas" brings criticism. Christ is being removed from Christmas at a pace that makes our heads spin. This is the devil's handiwork. He cannot prevent the story of Christmas because it did come to pass. But he is trying to prevent the story from reaching the ears of those for whom Jesus was born. If it was up to the devil and the world, the only story that would not be told at Christmastime is the story of Jesus. But God is in control, just as He was when it all came to pass in Bethlehem. The story of Christmas was written not by men, not by those who are against Christ, against those He came to save...the story of Christmas was written by God.

As a result it's not the way you and I would have written it. Nor Joseph. In the days leading up to Christmas, Joseph was a complete mess. The love of his life, his fiancé Mary, had been unfaithful to him. There was no other explanation. She was with child and they had not been together. Joseph was heartbroken. He would have been confused, even angry, but most of all he would have been mournfully sad. The night he went to bed, in our text, he would have drenched his pillow with his tears. This is not how he would have written the story. It was a painful story for him--painful and full of agony.

Maybe you can relate to Joseph. Christmas is almost here, but is the story going the way you would have written it? Or perhaps, as with Joseph, there is sadness and disappointment that you would have written out of the story. Christmas is not supposed to happen with families torn apart by death, drugs, alcohol, anger, divorce. Christmas is not supposed to be a time when there is no paycheck, when the cost of healthcare is skyrocketing, when the furnace goes out or the car's transmission needs replacing. Were we to write ourselves into the Christmas story, things would be different. We would be prosperous, happy, with a bright outlook. But we did not write the Christmas story, just as Joseph didn't. And so Christmas, as with every other time of the year, can be troubling, difficult, painful, and sad.

But that's not how the story ends. God sent His angel to Joseph to bring joy to his heart. Mary was not unfaithful. Her child was of the Holy Spirit. She would bear the Savior, his Savior, and the Savior of all sinners! This news turned Joseph's life around. God wrote the story, and God brought Joseph into the story in such a way that his pain was removed and his sadness was replaced with joy.

When God writes the story, we can believe that everything will turn out even better than we expect. He takes the pen and paper out of your hand, for you and I have no business writing the story. We write from our sinful perspective. We write to avoid suffering and persecution. We write in such a way that life is so good, that a Christmas Savior is the last thing we need.

No, God writes the story. And He sees that our hearts are entirely selfish. He sees that we want all the things in life we should not have. He sees our sadness and troubles, our pain and suffering. Just like He allowed Joseph to have pain and heartache, so God writes these into our story as well so that we see our need for Him, for His mercy, His gifts in Christ. The heart of the story is not Frosty, or Rudolf, or Santa. It's Jesus. It's He who "*will save His people from their sins.*"

God brought you into the story of Christmas and you were washed and sanctified in the waters of baptism. God brought you into the story because Jesus was born, suffered, died, and rose again for you. God brought you into the story because He has declared you forgiven of all your sins. You are one who belongs to Jesus. He has saved you. He finished the story of Christmas by going to the cross for you. And so, my friend, no matter what sadness, or troubles God has allowed to be written into your story, because your story is Jesus' story, because God has drawn you--He has written you into the story of Christmas--nothing will be able to separate you from His love in Christ Jesus. Not troubles, not pain and sadness. Not even death. It is certain. It is written. Written with the blood of Jesus. Amen.