

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Advent 4  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
**It's a miracle! Jesus is Immanuel!**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately. <sup>20</sup> But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

<sup>22</sup> All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.

—Matthew 1:18-25 EHV

I love this time of the year. I love all the services. I love the message. I love the simplicity of the hymns but the depth of their teaching. I'm sure you do, too. We love it. We love the children proclaiming this message in their services. Last week they did such a great job. We love the Christmas hymns and the Christmas message.

But I sometimes wonder if we sanitize the birth of Jesus, turning it into a child's bedtime story, that we forget that these were real people with real struggles. Do you ever think about that? Joseph and Mary are real people. They had real struggles. What God had planned for bringing the Savior of the world into this world was not easy for Joseph and Mary.

When Matthew tells us about the birth of Jesus, he gives us the perspective of Joseph. And today, I want us to just ponder for a few moments what this was like for Joseph. This was not easy for him.

Joseph was a carpenter who lived in Nazareth. Nazareth wasn't a very popular town. People often curled their lips at Nazareth. It was probably only a few acres with a few hundred people. Joseph lived in Nazareth, and he proposed marriage to a young lady by the name of Mary.

Now in that culture, engagement meant a little more than it does in our culture today. Back then, once you were engaged, you were legally bound to your fiancée. You still would have to go through the ceremony before you start living together, which likely happened months after the engagement. But once you were engaged, that was it. Legally, you were married. That's why Matthew writes, **“Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph.”** She was “betrothed” to Joseph.

Now here's where we have to fill in some of the gaps in the Christmas narrative. In Luke's Gospel, he writes, **“In the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy], the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged in marriage to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.”** So, Joseph and Mary were betrothed when the Angel Gabriel came to Mary.

And that was quite the encounter Mary had with the Angel Gabriel. He announced to her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. She was going to give birth to the Son of God, and she was to give him the name Jesus. It's at this time that the angel also announced to her that her relative Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy.

Now, it appears as though Mary doesn't tell Joseph about this angelic encounter. Not yet. Rather, it's at this time when Mary takes a trip to see Elizabeth. She travels the four or five days from Nazareth down to Judah. It was approximately 90 miles.

So, put yourself in Joseph's situation here. His fiancée, Mary, starts to act strange. She seems very nervous and at the same time very excited. And then seemingly out of nowhere, she leaves Nazareth and travels south. She takes off to stay with her relatives, and she was gone for three months. Three months. And then she returns. And I imagine that Mary is beginning to show. Joseph notices, and it's here where they had a deep heart-to-heart conversation.

“Yes, Joseph, I was gone for three months. And yes, I am pregnant, but it's not because of another man. Not at all. Joseph, **it's a miracle!** An angel visited me three months ago, and he told me that God the Holy Spirit caused me

to conceive. In fact, I already know that I am expecting a boy. That's what is in my womb. And this isn't just any boy. This is the Son of God. I am carrying the Promised Messiah."

Can you picture Joseph? Mouth draped open with astonishment. Eyes gazing with disbelief. "Seriously! That's your story, Mary! You're pregnant because *God* impregnated you?"

Joseph didn't buy it. Not at all. Now, the Bible describes Joseph as a righteous man. He was a godly man, a God-fearing man. If he was going to get married, it wasn't going to be to someone like Mary. He couldn't. He wouldn't. But he also cared about her. He didn't want to make a public example out of her. He didn't want to disgrace her. Oh, God's Old Testament covenant stated that he could have dragged her into court. Remember that they were legally married. He could have put her on trial and even had her stoned to death because of adultery. But he didn't want to do that to her. So, instead Joseph was planning to fill out some paperwork and **"divorce her privately."**

I mean, what was he to do? If a young lady came into my office and said, "Pastor, I'm pregnant. I'm a virgin. I have never been with a man, but I am going to give birth to the Son of God in six months," I wouldn't believe her. Would you?

Let's not sanitize this. Joseph is a real man with real struggles about his real wife who is really pregnant, but not from him. Mary exclaims, "Joseph, **it's a miracle!**" Uh, right. Mary, that just doesn't happen.

How many restless nights did Joseph have? Who knows! But one night God came to Joseph in order to set the record straight. **"But as he was considering these things (divorcing his wife privately), an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'"**

In other words, "Joseph, Mary's story is true. She has not been with another man. The child conceived in her *is* from the Holy Spirit." **It's a miracle!** How astounding! There's no biological father. This child was conceived without any male genetic contribution. And if you remember the genetics of X and Y chromosomes, there is no way, not even with cloning, for a female to produce a male. It's impossible, except that it's not in this instance.

In fact, this is exactly what God prophesied 700 years earlier. **"All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,' which means, 'God with us.'"**

Joseph was to take Mary home as his wife, not to cover up an illegitimate birth, but to serve as the earthly guardian, the legal father for the Christ-child. Yes. Mary is a virgin who is pregnant and will give birth to a son.

But that's not the greatest miracle here. As astounding as the virgin birth is, it's not the greatest miracle or wonder that God worked here. It's only the vehicle God used to work a far, far greater miracle. That child in Mary's womb is not just some child conceived by the Holy Spirit. That child is God himself. Immanuel. **It's a miracle! Jesus is Immanuel!**

I have to imagine that Joseph's head was spinning here. Is yours? This is God in the flesh. God incarnate. How can the eternal, almighty, omnipresent God take a full human nature, body and soul, into his person? How can he be both the Son of God and the Son of Man? How can his humanity not be consumed by his divinity? How can his divinity not be debased by his humanity? How can he remain fully divine while also at the same time becoming fully human? How can the Word, who is with God and is God, become flesh? How can he be Immanuel, "God with us," God in the flesh?"

Joseph's head is spinning. Is yours? "I know this is hard to believe. But, Joseph, this is what has been promised for hundreds, thousands of years. Your wife, Joseph, your wife, Mary, is carrying the Son of God, the Savior of the world."

His head may have been spinning from these words. This sounded way too good to be true. But he believed the words and then did as the angel told him. **"When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus."**

**It's a miracle! Jesus is Immanuel!** Joseph believed the impossible. To this day, everyone remembers Joseph on Christmas Eve. That's Joseph, a believer in God's impossible promises.

But, in many ways, you're in the same position as he was in. Every Christmas, you are put into a position where you are asked to believe impossible promises.

"I promise you," God says to you, "that because of my Son, born on Christmas, I promise you that I will forgive you for all the sins you have ever committed in your life." That's an amazing promise. Do you believe it?

"I promise you," God says, "that the moment you die, I'm going to take your soul to be with me forever in heaven." That's an amazing promise. Do you believe it?

"I promise you," God says, "that I know how to work all things out for your eternal good. I have all things in my control, and I control all things for your eternal benefit." That's an amazing promise. Do you believe it?

My friends, I know that Christmas isn't about Joseph, but I think he's worth considering as we face some incredible promises from God. God does the impossible, and he promises the impossible. What will you do with the impossible?

Look at Joseph. And believe just as he believed. As challenging as it would have been for him to take Mary home as his wife, he did it. He simply believed the message of the angels. And so do we.

So, this Christmas when we sing these truths again through simple hymns, don't lose sight of the miracle they proclaim. Believe them. As impossible as they may seem, they are true. **"Christ, by highest heav'n adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord, late in time behold him come, offspring of a virgin's womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th' incarnate Deity! Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!"** (from Hark! The Herald Angels Sing). **Yes, it's a miracle! Jesus is Immanuel! Amen.**