

For those that don't know our family, Nathan is our 15 year old son. He is always interested in detail, and even more when it has something to do with him. As happens from time to time we end up talking about when the children were very young, and Nathan will want to know the intricate detail of his birth. Questions will come like – “was I a pretty child when I was born” or “So dad is it true that when mummy was giving birth to me you were able to see everything.”

And so either Alison or I will go through all the detail – what the weather was like on the day he was born, what time it happened at, what was he like on that first day. We tell him about the days leading up to the planned delivery, who the hospital team were looking after mummy (and the true story that the anaesthetist for mummy was a friend of ours in Coleraine, who then was the same anaesthetist who put me out for my vasectomy (and that's all you are hearing about that story). Anyway, all of these details lead to the moment of Nathan's birthday – Friday 20th July 2007 at around 1:30pm. And around that time we have a photo in the theatres as Alison & I hold little Nathan.

Nathan's request, of course, is not just to hear the facts surrounding his birth. Rather, he wishes to hear again about relationships and identity, to hear how the beginning informs the present and the future. As the one telling the story I have a particular perspective on it all, but I'm absolutely sure that Alison has a different perspective on it all.

And so our reading tonight begins with those words, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about”. This is Matthew's account of the story, but it's different to how Luke describes it; in the same way that my recollection of Nathan's birth will be somewhat different to Alison's.

You see Matthew takes us through the lens of Joseph, whereas Luke takes us through the lens of Mary. You see as Matthew writes this it's probably around 80AD and it's addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who are being pushed out of larger Jewish communities after the destruction of Jerusalem. And therefore Matthew is at pains to place Jesus' identity very much within the Jewish community, which is why he outlines the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham. Not only is Matthew ensuring that people know Jesus to be a Jew, but also that Joseph is a righteous man and that he embodies the Jewish tradition.

In Matthew 1:18–25 we read that during the time of his engagement to Mary, Joseph discovers that she is pregnant. Joseph knows the baby is not his, and he knows that Jewish law would find Mary guilty of adultery, an act that can be punished with death and it is always punishable by shame. The law mandated that Joseph divorce her. However, because Joseph is a righteous man, he also understands another part of his Jewish heritage: he understands that the law is to be tempered with mercy. And so instead of exposing Mary to a public divorce, he decides to dismiss her quietly, in a way that would reduce any public inquiry.

Whilst Joseph considers his options, the faith and willingness of this man is displayed as God reaches from heaven to earth in an incredible way. An angel appears to Joseph and speaks the same words that we will hear on Christmas morning in Luke's gospel: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to do something outrageous in order to bring to life something that the law and the prophets have yearned for, do not be afraid to do something that is way beyond your comfort zone, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” (Matt. 1:19, paraphrase). And so this is a pivotal moment in Joseph's life; all of what

he knows—his life, his religion, his ethics—is being questioned by an angel in a dream, and that angel is inviting him to put to one side all that cultural knowledge and understanding to be a part in a much larger story.

What would you do? Would your mind be open to things that go far beyond your limits? I actually think that most of us in our lives very often limit ourselves to what is safe and comfortable. We each have our own ways of dealing with personal, spiritual, and professional matters, our own ways of moving through the things that life throws at us.

I can remember the time in my life when I knew God was calling me to ministry. My salary was good, my future seemed healthy, so why on earth rock the boat? I believe for many of us we want to remain in that safe place, not ever to be pushed beyond that point. Joseph was about to surrender all for the sake of the Kingdom. Can we say that we would be willing to do the same in our lives?

And the reality is that God knew the issues humanly speaking were scary. After all he knows us, he knows when we rise and when we lie down, he knows our thoughts. And so into this space the Angel speaks into Joseph's anxious thoughts with the words, "Do not be afraid". "Do not be afraid," the angel is saying to you and to me about stepping out for the work of the Kingdom.

But it's not a new thing, and I hope because of that it gives you comfort to know that it's been happening all throughout history with God's people. It seems that throughout the Bible God is always trying to tell us this—"Do not be afraid, Abraham, when I ask you to leave your homeland and to travel to a new place that will be your own. Do not be afraid, Moses, for I will be with you when you, a slave, speak to Pharaoh, the king of the Egyptians. Do not be afraid of any evil, David, for the Lord will be your shepherd no matter where you are. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace with God" (Luke 1:28, paraphrase). Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to act.

And this brings us back to Joseph. In Matthew's story of Jesus's birth, Joseph is asked to make a leap, to take an action that goes beyond how he would normally understand the law. He understood probably more than anyone else that word Immanuel, God is with us. He was about to make a step of faith, and whilst it went totally against anything he considered holy, he obeyed.

And for some of us tonight I think we need to be thinking more about this on the Eve of Christmas. Are there things that you know you should be doing in your life for the sake of the Kingdom, but you would rather remain in that safe place. How much has your faith in God put you at risk? If it hasn't then can you really call that faith? If Immanuel, if God is truly with us, then who can stand against us? As we take a break now before the start of another year, what is going to be different about 2023? Is it just going to be the same old same old, or are you truly going to take a step of obedience for God? What truly matters in 2023? Your commitment to devotion with him, or your commitment to your daily job? Your obedience to spend more time worshipping and fellowship with believers in our church family, or your need to spend Sundays somewhere else? And you might be asking, but Jonny you don't understand my pressures. You're right I don't. But my response is to look at Joseph, the responsibilities on his shoulders had just trebled, but he's being told to trust in God for the future. He didn't understand at all the path he was being asked to follow, but he obeyed.

24th December 2022 Matthew 1:18-25

I'd invite us now to simply take a few moments in the quietness of this place and begin to pray to God that he would reveal to you where, like Joseph, he wants you to step out for him, but also to pray that you will be willing to obey his call. [PAUSE]

I pray that you and I in this church family, and in our individual lives with all its pressures, are encouraged to take a leap of action to draw nearer to something we maybe don't understand, but that we know we need to do in order to draw closer in 2023 to the God who was willing to risk everything for his love for you and me. Remember Emmanuel - God is with us: do not be afraid as you step out in his will.