

## Vertically Inclined

A sermon by John Strommen on Matt. 1:18-25 Dec. 23, 2018

When my oldest son, Thomas, was seven years old, he and I were on our way to pick up a Christmas tree when he asked a question: “Dad, do you believe in Santa Claus?”

I tried to change the subject. “Look, gas is only \$1.39 at Holiday!” But he persisted, “Dad, do you believe in Santa Claus?”

And I said, “Well, it doesn’t really matter what I think. What matters is what you think! Do you believe in Santa Claus?”

Thomas thought for a minute, and then he said, “Well, I don’t know...flying reindeer?...it seems kind of unlikely.”

Now, just for the record, Thomas did eventually state that he does believe in Santa.

I imagine the conversation between Mary and Joseph about her virgin pregnancy might have elicited a similar reaction. Clearly, Mary believed it, since she knew she had not been with a man. But Joseph? He was more like my little doubting Thomas. “I don’t know, Mary,” he may have said. “A pregnant virgin...it seems kind of unlikely.”

How would any of us in Joseph’s shoes react to that? Of course Joseph didn’t believe her! That’s not the way women get pregnant in this world! But frankly, at this point, Joseph was more preoccupied with real-world concerns. Mary and Joseph, you see, were engaged in a pre-arranged one-year betrothal – and backing out of a betrothal was almost as difficult as getting a divorce.

And here’s the hard truth: if the bride-to-be had relations with a man who was not her fiancé, the penalty was often death by stoning. One thing Joseph knew beyond a shadow of a doubt: He wasn’t the father.

So, Joseph was faced with several very difficult things here. First, there was the apparent unfaithfulness of Mary. Given that Mary had a good reputation, Joseph must have been both hurt and angry that Mary, of all people, would do such a thing.

Second, Joseph was at the very least facing the public shame and embarrassment of an engagement to a seemingly reckless young woman, and as a faithful Jew, it would be very important that he did the “right” thing and not just look the other way. But – and this is the third point – if he acted out of any sense of retribution, as many men would here, Joseph was keenly aware of the possibility of a tragic end to the life of the woman he may very well have already loved. And bear in mind that Mary would have been only 14, 15 or 16 years old.

In verse 19, we learn what Joseph’s decision was. It says that Joseph, “being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” This meant breaking off the betrothal without pressing charges, which means he did not want her harmed. So, Joseph engaged in what Shakespeare termed, “justice tempered with mercy.” The marriage would not happen. That was justice. But he would forgive her, so her life could go on. That was mercy. Joseph’s character and faithfulness to God were exemplary.

The story continues in verse 20:

*But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'*

Joseph had just experienced a “vertical moment” – an invitation to view his and Mary’s lives as an intersection of the earthly horizontal realm and the divine vertical realm. Sometimes the vertical rearranges the horizontal.

And what was Joseph’s response to this *vertical* moment? Faith. He believed that God was talking to him through his dream. So, when he awoke, verse 24 tells us, he did just as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took Mary as his wife.

We learn here that Joseph had the same qualities that Mary had: faithfulness and obedience. We also learn from this story that this horizontal world of ours, where everything must be explained by natural causes, is capable of being interrupted by the vertical, which is to say, God. Call it a miracle if you like or call it “Emmanuel – God with us.”

Joseph and Mary reminded us that there are two kinds of people in the world: the vertically inclined and the vertically challenged. Now, one can be vertically inclined in many ways. As a basketball player, I used to be vertically inclined, meaning that in my 20’s, I had a pretty good vertical jump, but nowadays gravity seems a lot stronger than it used to.

But the vertical I’m speaking of here has nothing to do with our capacity to go vertical and ascend, not physically, not otherwise. Rather, it has everything to do with our openness to recognize that God goes vertical. Or should I say God comes down vertically, and right into our lives. So, the vertically inclined people recognize that God interrupts and acts in this world and the vertically challenged people live their lives on a flat, horizontal plane. One dimensional. Everything is explained in natural causes. By the way, eventually this world becomes quite meaningless.

In college, I remember being in an argument with an agnostic who wanted proof that God exists. This topic is a classic horizontal flat-liner. Unless you can prove God’s existence, like some kind of scientific phenomenon, then God doesn’t exist. Think about it, if you were God, would you allow yourself to be reduced to a test tube or a telescope – just a data point in the scientific world? People who insist that nothing is real unless you can scientifically or logically prove it will always be vertically challenged, because they only understand the horizontal, that truth comes only in certain, pre-approved packages. The vertical – in the Bible and now - is always shrouded in mystery and unpredictability, in wonder and awe. It is accessible only by a leap of faith. That’s right, you don’t know. You could be wrong. It makes things more complicated. Look at Mary and Joseph.

And don’t think this is only about *whether* you believe in God. Many believe in God but don’t think God is involved personally in their lives. In fact, many Christians believe like Christians but live like atheists – meaning there is no room in their lives for God to act.

Now, admittedly, something like a virgin birth is extraordinary, not normally how God works. We would be right to question it if someone claimed it today and said God was doing this. What's at stake here is the bigger question: whether we think God acts within our lives. In that regard, things are no different for us than for Joseph. God acts decisively and vertically in your world as well. Do you have faith that this is so? Is there room in your life for God to speak and do a new thing? Or is your whole world a horizontal world, governed only by the laws of science, economics, culture, and the survival of the fittest?

Are you vertically inclined or are you vertically challenged?

May our lives be characterized by "justice tempered with mercy," so that we might be on the same wave-length as our God who is just and merciful.

May our lives be open to the wondrous and mysterious, the vertical interruptions from a God who is invested in us.

May our lives be lived with faith in a God who came down to us that we might have life. Amen.