

# Pull Back the Curtains

## Matthew 1:18-25

### Introduction

While listening to the radio recently, I heard a conversation about the lack of new Christmas movies hitting the theaters in recent years.

- The most promising one this year stars Arnold Schwarzenegger as Santa.
- Unless, of course, you are a fan of the Jonas Brothers ... and then you can go see "A Very Jonas Christmas."

The reviewer said that most Christmas-themed movies now go straight to streaming venues these days ... or are produced solely for the Hallmark channel.

- Hallmark is releasing 24 new movies, adding to their current total of 174.

I will always have a soft spot in my heart for the classic Christmas movies of my childhood: Frosty the Snowman, Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer and the Charlie Brown Christmas show with the sad looking tree and Linus' recitation of the Christmas story.

- My favorite non-animated Christmas movie is "It's a Wonderful Life" starring Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed and Harry Travers as Clarence the angel who needed his wings.

It's a Wonderful Life. In our Gospel text, Joseph was living a wonderful life.

- He had his own business – a carpentry shop. And from what we can gather that business was successful and his works was well-regarded by the residents of his hometown of Nazareth.
- And he had a girlfriend. Not just ANY girlfriend. He had THE perfect girlfriend. Every other guy in town was probably jealous of him, because it certainly appears she was the best girl in town. The Donna Reed of her day. She was a good Jewish girl who came from a good family. They were descendants of King David, don't you know. She was highly regarded by all the people of Nazareth.
  - Even God thought she was awesome. In another passage of Scripture we see God's messenger angel Gabriel relay these words from God Himself to Mary:

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28)

Another translation says:

You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! (Luke 1:28, MSG)

A good job. A good woman. No doubt about it, Joseph was living a wonderful life.

- But unbeknownst to Joseph, God was sending the Light into the darkness of this world.
- And Joseph was a key part of this plan.

It was a wonderful life for this man Joseph. The well-crafted plan was falling into place.

Until Joseph discovered that Mary – his perfect Mary – was pregnant.

- Everything we have said in this sermon series about the darkness in the world came rushing in to Joseph's life. Can you imagine it?

So as Joseph was preparing to make the wrong decision, God intervened and pulled back the curtain to reveal the DIVINE plan.

As you may know I have been in quite a few theater productions over the years. That experience is what prompted me to title today's message "Pull Back the Curtains."

- There is a moment on stage just before the show starts when the actors are all in place, the orchestra is finishing the overture and the lights go down behind the curtain.
- Then the curtain opens, and the lights come up full. The whole stage is lit. The actors are in full light.
- When the lights are on, the darkness is gone, and the drama that has been prepared goes on.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

God revealed the DIVINE plan to Joseph. In other words, God turned on the lights. And Joseph very quickly learned a very important lesson. And here's the lesson ...

### **GOD'S PLAN FOR OUR LIVES IS ALWAYS BIGGER THAN OUR PLAN**

When he found out Mary was pregnant, Joseph came up with a new plan for his life. From a human perspective, his new plan made a lot of sense. Our text describes it like this:

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

To our American way of thinking, the relationship between Joseph and Mary is a bit confusing. If they weren't married, why not just break off the engagement? In our world broken engagements happen all the time.

- In fact, according to the trade union for brokers who sell engagement rings, 20% of all engagements are called off. The number one reason being the couple was unwilling to compromise on some key relational issues.

But in those days, it wasn't that simple. Getting married was actually a three-step process.

- Step 1 was the engagement. This often came about when the couple were only children – arranged by their parents or a professional matchmaker. That one you COULD break off without any consequences.
- Step 3 was the actual marriage.

- But in between Step 1 and Step 3 was Step 2: the betrothal. That's where Mary and Joseph were. The engagement was over. They weren't married, but the wedding was coming soon.
  - But the difference was that the betrothal was legally binding.

Being betrothed was serious stuff. There were two ways you could get "un-betrothed." The first was for either the bride or groom-to-be to die. The other way was for the groom to file for a divorce. Women didn't have that second option. So there it was: murder or divorce.

I have tried to imagine what Joseph was thinking in those days. He thought he had the perfect girlfriend, and that she was 100% committed to him. This year of betrothal was all about getting their new home ready and about daydreaming about playing with his future children and growing old together with his wife. Hallmark Christmas movie stuff. It was going to be a wonderful life.

But then Joseph gets word that Mary is pregnant. We don't know how he found out, but he knew about it before the angel appeared to him. He knew about it enough in advance for a plan to develop in his mind.

We don't know a lot about Joseph. He gets often overlooked in the whole story. He gets overlooked in the whole New Testament! But even though we don't know much, the guy had to have been stunned and heartbroken all at the same time. Empathize with him for a minute. His plans for a wonderful life were gone.

The little that we know about Joseph is summed up in two descriptive phrases in this story:

1. He was faithful to the law. He was a godly man – just like that woman he had planned to marry. Two godly people.
2. He loved Mary dearly. So much so that when she turned up pregnant he treated her with kindness. He could have made a public spectacle of her, but instead he chose to quietly divorce her.
  - That's awesome, isn't it? Even though she had broken his heart, he was still kind to her. What a guy!

But before he could file the paperwork and finalize the divorce, God turned on the lights:

Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:20)

Don't divorce her, Joseph. Go ahead with the marriage. It's not your baby Joseph but marry her anyway.

- Oh, and congratulations! You have been chosen to raise the Son of God. Wow.

That's a totally different plan, isn't it? This new plan of God:

- Would mean a lifetime of behind-the-back whispers about who the “real” father was.
- Would mean having to move his family to Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod who was out to kill the newborn “King of the Jews.” And always worrying about who might be next.
- And so much more.

A different plan. But a bigger, more incredible plan than Joseph or any other man could ever have imagined for his life.

- He would be the earthly father of the Messiah.
- He would watch the Messiah grow up.
- He would be responsible for teaching the Messiah how to be a good man.
- He would teach the Messiah how to throw a ball, hammer a nail.

There is a teaching in the 55<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Isaiah that says this lesson well:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

The biggest thought you think, the biggest plan you make, is so very much smaller than what God has in store for you.

- There is always a temptation to settle for something small – something we can conceive and wrap our heads around.
- But God thinks at a different level.

Jeremiah relays this Word from God:

For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

There are really two WONDERS to EXPERIENCE in this part of the Christmas story.

- The first one is how God was able to choose the right earthly dad and mom to care for the Baby Jesus.
  - I don’t know ... maybe that’s why it took so long for God to send His Son.
- But the second wonder is equally wonderful. Our text says:

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (Matthew 1:24)

No hesitation. No arguments. No questions. He got up, set aside his plans for his life, and did what the Lord had commanded. What an example! This godly carpenter lived out his faith, just as he had been taught in Proverbs.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

We should too.

### **APPLICATION**

I have asked you to commit a verse of Scripture to memory to help lock in this year's Advent theme of "Shining Into the Darkness." Our verse this year is:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Let's repeat it together.

Amen