

Emmanuel

Matthew 1:18-25

Scholar William Preston, a man who apparently had a lot of time on his hands, calculated that Luke 1 and 2 contain 86% of all the text concerning Mary in the entire Bible. Matthew gives us the story from Joseph's point of view. (For the record, Preston notes that Matthew 1 contains 91% of all the text concerning Joseph in the entire Bible.) When Mary reveals her pregnancy to him, he knows the child cannot be his. They are betrothed. According to law and custom this means their families have reached an agreement—usually when the girl hits puberty with the boy a few years older—that they will get married in their late teens. They would not have come together—in any sense of the phrase—before their wedding night.

Under these terms Joseph has every right to divorce Mary. And yes, it took a divorce to end a betrothal. Joseph could do this in a very public manner. But being just, he resolves to do it quietly in order to protect Mary's reputation. The fact that they live in an over-grown small town, where Mary's shame would certainly have become public and *quick*, does not seem to have influenced Joseph's thinking. In the end it does not matter. In a dream he sees an angel who tells him to name the child Jesus, “because he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus is rendered Joshua in the Old Testament. Both forms derive from Yahweh, the unspoken name the Hebrews used for God. All of them mean the same thing: “he saves.”

Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah. Two important points stand out: a virgin shall conceive, and the child she bears will be called Emmanuel. Matthew helpfully translates this name as “God with us”. Joseph correctly identifies Mary as the virgin in question. He goes through with the marriage. They have the child and name him Jesus. When our son was a young boy I told him about the Big Bang, the instant in time in which the universe was created. “I don't like to hear this story!” he said. I asked why. He said, “Because what if it didn't happen just right? We wouldn't be here!” What if Joseph had not listened to the angel? What if he had divorced Mary? Of course, if the baby really were Emmanuel, he would remain God with Us even if his mom got divorced. But would that have changed her ability to raise him in such a way that he could properly perform his messianic duties? Would they have had to move to the anonymity of a big city? Would his apparent lack of a father hamstring his development?

Ah but Joseph married Mary. She bore the child. They named him Jesus, but we sing of him to this day as Emmanuel. God *is* with us. Jesus *did* save us from our sins. So much of the pageantry we will see in a few moments has no secure basis in the written record of the Gospels. An open-minded, careful reading of Matthew tells us nothing about no room at the inn and a stable. In fact, this Gospel tells us the Magi found the baby “going into *the house*” where they saw Mary and Jesus. And the passage tells us that some indeterminate period of time—maybe weeks—passed after his birth before the Magi ever arrived. It does not matter. What does matter is that we keep our focus where the angel and Matthew put it the night Joseph had his dream:

The Holy Spirit, God, is the father of Jesus, God with Us. He saves us from our sins. *That* is the true meaning of Christmas. Because of *that* we throw pageants and sing carols and give presents. The date for Christmas also has nothing to do with the biblical record. But the date we have assigned it arrives in one week. During those seven days try daily to take time to remember that Jesus is God with Us, and he saves us from our sins. Praise God!