

I remember in high school there was a classmate of mine who had fallen out of favor with almost everyone because of some bad choices and a very embarrassing situation. A teacher asked me to meet with her over the course of a few weeks in an effort to counsel and encourage her and then advocate for her in the hope of restoring her to good standing among our classmates. As you might imagine, the risk was that her public shame would become my public shame because I associated myself with her. The risk to popularity for a high schooler was significant. But I cared about this girl, wanted the best for her, and *had hope it would work*. So I endured it.

Think of a time you had to endure something. It could have been a tough choice or challenging circumstances through which you had to persevere. It could have been to hang tight in a difficult relationship, take a stand for something you believed in, or live out your faith in a way that was unpopular. Endurance is hard and, because of that, it's in short supply these days. For many, the mere possibility of adversity is a reason to check out. In those instances where you chose to endure, what was it that kept you going?

This morning we continue our Advent series called *Expecting* where we're looking at the different characters of the Christmas story to see how they lived expecting the arrival of Jesus. Today we focus on Joseph. He is going to be confronted with an apparently hopeless situation that leaves him with two choices. One will set him free of it and one will require him to endure. And what we'll see is that the thing that keeps him going is the very thing that will keep us going in times that require endurance.

[Matthew 1:18-19] ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed to one another. We mentioned this last week and talked about it at length at the end of our *To Be Continued* series. Jewish marriages were arranged by parents and included a legally binding contract. Once negotiated, the young man and woman were legally married, considered husband and wife, but they remained living with their parents for an additional year to prove the faithfulness of the pledge that the bride was pure (not pregnant by another man).

If you remember from last week, Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel and told the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and conceive a son in her womb. She immediately left to be with her relative Elizabeth, also pregnant, and Luke tells us she was there for three months before returning home. When she arrived, she had some big news to tell, and it was possible the unique shape of her body said all that was needed. That news eventually got to Joseph.

I vividly remember the times Martha told me she was pregnant. She got so creative the first time that I didn't know what she was trying to tell me. Two years later she used our toddler to tell me a second baby was on the way. And she told me herself of the third. All were wonderful news. All were announcements of joy. But it wouldn't be so for Joseph. They had lived apart and there was no way he was the father.

Joseph received the news and was left with a decision. He had several legal options, because the offense was clear. It's like in football when the other team gets a penalty. The offended team can choose how that penalty is carried out. For Joseph, he could divorce her publicly by declaring it at the city gates. The Mosaic law would allow for the stoning of Mary in this case and, while that wasn't common at that time, she would have been ostracized and humiliated publicly. He could divorce her quietly, which would have not been as humiliating but would have left her a single mother in a time where women had very little recourse if left on their own. He also could have gone ahead and stayed married to her.

Matthew tells us he planned to divorce her, but we get a glimpse of his character in the way he planned to carry it out. He will divorce Mary, but he will do it quietly, "unwilling to put her to shame". He does this because he's just, he's righteous. He is a keeper of the law, and he is also noble in how he deals with others.

How do you respond when you perceive you've been wronged? Joseph's approach is in such contrast to how our world handles things today. When we are wronged, or there is a perception of wrongdoing, we look for ways to destroy. We are going to get even. Social media becomes a public weapon, calls for boycotts, poor Yelp reviews. Being offended has become license to destroy the offender.

But Joseph doesn't go that route. He chooses to do the very best he can to keep her from public shame. But he's about to get a command and a message of hope that will call for him to change his plans. The character that desires for Mary to not be shamed is about to be tested, and Joseph will have to endure the outcome.

[Matthew 1:20-23] ²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Like Mary, Joseph is visited by a heavenly messenger about what is to come. He addresses him as "Joseph, son of David". It is likely that, while Joseph knew he was in the line of David, he was never referred to in this way. It would be like you being called by your relation to a well-known but long dead relative instead of by your parents. That someone would call me son of Arminius instead of son of Hans. This would have gotten his attention and clearly communicated the gravity of what was about to be said (just in case a visit by an angel of the Lord didn't accomplish that!) He would have perceived something historic and, since it appears Joseph was a devout follower of the Lord, Messianic in that greeting, since the Messiah was to come from the line of David and sit on his throne forever.

The first command he gives to Joseph is to not fear. He is about to be asked to do something very difficult and fear may be his reaction. This was the same command given to Mary and will be given to all who are visited by heavenly messengers in the Christmas story. And it's a command God gives to us this day.

Fear is a powerful force. Positively, it helps us avoid danger. It's a good thing to be afraid of grizzly bears. But fear can also be an overwhelming force that freezes us and potentially prevents us from responding to God's call in our lives. The fear of pain, embarrassment, failure, shame, and loss can prevent us from answering a call that may ask us to endure difficulty. It can cause us to run away where God is telling us to lean in. In telling Joseph not to fear, what he's really telling him is to hope in God. Hope is living with the certainty of the promises of God. It is more than wishful thinking. It's a living confidence that God will do what God says he is going to do.

Hope is the opposite of fear. Fear is dictated by the severity of circumstances. Hope is dictated by the character of God. Fear allows us to be controlled by that which is temporary. Hope allows us to be controlled by He who is eternal. Fear says "Stop, you can't handle this." Hope says "Go, God's got this." Expecting Jesus is to practice hope, and that overcomes fear. **Hope produces endurance.**

The angel tells Joseph not to divorce Mary because he has some hope-inducing, fear-destroying good news. The child Mary is carrying is not from another man but from God himself. The baby she carries is to be called two names that will mean a tremendous amount to Joseph. They will give him hope and inspire him to endure. The baby's name is to be Jesus, and he will be referred to as Immanuel.

The first name described what Jesus came to do. Jesus was a common name, Joshua or Yeshua in Hebrew, which means "Yahweh saves". Many Jews were looking for the Messiah to save them from Israel's enemies, namely the Romans. But students of scripture would know from passages like Jeremiah 31 that proclaims the coming of the New Covenant and Psalm 130:8 which says "And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities" that the promised Messiah was coming to do much more than that. The angel told Joseph this child will save people from their sins.

The second name described who Jesus came to be. This child is referred to as Immanuel, which means "God with us." The angel references Isaiah 7:14 to show how this child was a fulfillment of that prophecy and how God was executing his plan of salvation through him.

It is in those two names that you find the purpose and glory of the Gospel. It's in those two names where you find the reason for Christmas. In the beginning, man and God were together in perfect union. But man fell, and it created a divide between us and God. If there was no sin, there would be no need for Christmas. Or, if we could solve the problem of sin on our own, there would be no need for Christmas. But we were left helpless and hopeless, apart from God, and incapable of doing anything about it. The message to Joseph, and the hope of Christmas, is that **God came to be with us to save us, and God saves us so that he can be with us.** Joseph may not completely understand it the way those of us on this side of the cross do, but he knows enough to endure with hope.

[Matthew 1:24-25] ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Joseph immediately obeyed the angel's command. He took Mary to be his wife, well before the traditional year was completed. He would not allow her to be exposed to a harsh and judgmental society as she grew more noticeably pregnant while still living in her parents' home. He also did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born so that there would be no confusion or suspicion that the child could be his. And when Jesus was born, he named him what the angel told him to name him.

This is not just following a few simple instructions. This is an act of great selflessness and endurance for the sake of the gospel. Think about what he laid down by obeying. He laid down his legal rights by taking Mary as his wife instead of divorcing her. He laid down his marital rights by not consummating the marriage until after Jesus' birth. And he gave up his parental rights by naming Jesus what God told him to name him.

And because he did, consider what he endured. Even though he took Mary to himself, word likely got around that she was pregnant beforehand. He took Mary's perceived shame upon himself. And for those who didn't think she was carrying the Messiah, they likely considered him a chump and looked with suspicion on his wife and, ultimately, his child. We see evidence of this in John 8. Around 30 years after his birth, Jesus is going back-and-forth with the Pharisees and they say, "We were not born of sexual immorality." As my boys say, the Pharisees tried to roast Jesus by implying he was born of sexual immorality. The shame was persistent.

He became the caretaker of the family and this child. If you keep reading in Matthew, Joseph is told take them and flee to Egypt when Herod orders the murder of all the children. And, finally, Joseph raised a son who constantly referred to his father but wasn't talking about him. Joseph did all of this because of hope. He endured because he lived expecting the Messiah. And while we don't hear anything from Joseph after the first few chapters of the Gospels, I believe we see the influence and impact of his life as an example to Jesus that went beyond teaching him his trade.

Jesus' life and ministry are a picture of endurance in hope. He too laid down his rights. He laid down his divine rights by being born. We always think of sweet 8 lb, 6 oz baby Jesus laying in a pile of hay, but this is the God of the universe who stooped down to enter time and creation and put on flesh to save us. As Philippians says, "Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself". He did that because we were helpless and hopeless in our current state. He also laid down his legal rights, both in the law of the land and the law of God. He was not given a fair trial by the authorities of the day and he did not deserve to suffer on the cross. But, like Joseph, he endured shame so that we don't have to.

[Hebrews 12:2] ² Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[Romans 10:11] ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."

Jesus endured the shame of the cross to free us from the shame of sin in the hope of reconciling us to himself. Hope produced endurance. And the first example he saw of this kind of endurance

in the midst of hope was his earthly father, Joseph, who laid down his rights to do what God was calling him to do.

And so I want to close by asking you to consider a question. Earlier in the week, I wanted to close by asking you: **What are you willing to endure for the sake of the Gospel?** But I think there's a better way to ask that, because endurance is the product of something else. So what I really want to ask you is: **How will the hope of Christmas propel you to live for Christ?**

For some of you, maybe God has been asking you to do something and it scares the heck out of you, and you are frozen. Live with the hope that the God who is asking you that is also the God who says, "Do not fear"? And he tells you not to fear because his name is Immanuel. He is with you.

Some of you have a person in your orbit who has been ostracized because of bad choices and they are covered up in shame. You are hesitant to engage because you don't want to be tarnished by it yourself, or maybe you're hesitant to go public with your faith. But might God be asking you to be a heavenly messenger of sorts because the grace and truth of Jesus Christ that you have to tell is the only hope that person living in shame has.

Some of you are in serious conflict with another person and you are digging in and holding on to your rights. But God moved towards us to reconcile us to himself. He laid down his rights so that we could be made right with him. Live out that hope by laying down your rights and pursue reconciliation with that person. That's the kind of endurance hope produces.

Our sermon planning team had a great conversation this week about the importance of Joseph. Why did God insist he endure? Why did he even have to be in the picture? Obviously, there's the line of David. Any child he adopted would be considered part of his line. But as I studied this week, I couldn't help but think that, of all the characters of the Christmas story, he exemplified how to live with hope more than anyone, and he's an incredible example to us. And because of that hope, he's a picture of Christlikeness before the world ever saw what Christ was like.