

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25

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Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.  
When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they came together,  
she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.  
Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace,  
planned to divorce her quietly.

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 will name him Jesus,  
for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill 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."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him,  
and took her as his wife,  
but he did not know her until she had borne a son.  
And he named him Jesus.

The birth of Jesus story in Matthew is an intimate story. It gives the audience inside information about Mary's engagement and her being with child "from the Holy Spirit." It describes Joseph's internal decision and his subsequent dream, and creates a highly sympathetic relationship with Joseph. The narrator informs the audience that all of this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet.

The final episode of Joseph doing what he was commanded—how he took Mary as his wife—culminates with the climactic statement, "And he named him Jesus." This is the shortest and therefore the slowest sentence in the whole of the story. It creates emphasis. It is a time to hold Jesus in your arms, as Joseph did, and to give him his name.

This is an opportunity to create the atmosphere of intimacy that is a central dimension of the birth story, of God's becoming intimate with us in the birth of Jesus and the way in which it happened. There are many levels of intimacy in this story, including sexual intimacy, even though the translations avoid words that would have sexual connotations. Nevertheless, the story is about sexual intercourse, marriage and divorce.

The story is about the intimate relationship between God and Joseph, between Mary and Joseph, between Joseph and Jesus. It is also about the intimate relationship between the prophet Isaiah who had prophesied these events hundreds of years before their fulfillment in this story. The tone of the story is one of quietness and intimacy, of interior experience, especially that of Joseph.

The primary speech in the story, in terms of the characters that you are presenting, is the address of the angel who speaks to Joseph. The angels in New Testament stories are messengers who first of all have to get their recipients calmed down enough so that they can hear the message that they have brought from God. And so, they are characters that are quiet, not intimidating, and yet they are authoritative because they are messengers from God. Communicating the character of the angel is a central part of telling this story well. In this story, the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream and is especially quiet and intimate. It is like whispering in his ear.

### **Structure of the Story**

The first episode in this story is the crisis of Mary's conception and of Joseph's response. The second episode is the dream and the address of the angel to Joseph. The third is the prophecy. These are the words of Isaiah so you can give Isaiah in this episode a distinctive voice if you choose. And the fourth episode is the birth and the naming.

### **Verbal Threads**

1. The name of Jesus – First sentence: "the birth of *Jesus*, the Messiah," the end of the angels address to Joseph is "you will name him *Jesus*," and then the end of the story is Joseph's obeying the angel "and he named him *Jesus*."
2. Conceive, bear a son, child from the Holy Spirit, bore a son – although not as clear, each episode has this verbal thread in some form.

The overall dynamic of this story is a dynamic of crisis and then of the resolution of the tension that was created by the conception of the child in Mary as a virgin. The plot of the story is the dealing with the problem created by an unusual conception. All of the dynamics become increasingly intimate, ending with the intimacy of relationship between Joseph and Jesus.