



Joy Is Born!

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Our media portrays this a season of endless celebration, festivities, laughter, and contentment. For many, holidays are times of despair, loss, and grief over broken homes or the death of loved ones. Amid plastered smiles, many struggle through the season with burdens of despair and dread. Can joy flourish and grow amid turmoil, grief, doubt, despair, and expected disaster? How can joy find root when all we can anticipate is disgrace?

The announcement came unexpectedly. It could not have come at a worse time. Mary was already betrothed. In the eyes of the law and the community, she was already a married woman. For her to become pregnant before celebrating her marriage and moving into Joseph's home would be a disgrace. She could lose her life, though that was not necessarily the standard practice of the day. It was what the law defined for a woman pregnant out of wedlock, but it was not always carried out. More likely, her marriage would be dissolved before the wedding, and she would spend the rest of her days in disgrace.

She was still a young girl with most of her life ahead of her. The dreams of marriage, children, and caring for a family as her mother had done were all in jeopardy. Perhaps she would remain at home with her parents. Perhaps she would be forced into the street with adultery and prostitution the only recourse left for her support.

How much of this went through her head at the time of the angel's announcement, we will never know. They were serious concerns for any young woman of her day. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock could be disastrous to a greater degree than a young girl would experience today. There were no crisis pregnancy centers available. There was no Christian Women's Job Core available to prepare her for meeting her own financial needs without the aid of a working husband. It was a tough life that awaited any pregnant, unmarried girl.

There were expectations to meet in lists by the dozens. The announcement meant that she would be seen as a failure from life's beginning. She would be denied the opportunity to attempt to meet many of the others. Her reputation would be destroyed, along with any place in society as a respectable woman. The promises of life loomed before her like bait in a trap preparing to spring shut.

To be sure, Matthew says nothing at all about any announcement to Mary from angel, man, or beast. He simply describes her pregnant condition and references it as blessed by God. Seemingly, that is about all he has to say of Mary. Then again, it says much about God. In spite of all the tradition and lore of Mary's condition being sinful, distasteful, and repugnant in the eyes of society, somehow God has stepped in and accepted her condition with blessing!

Perhaps we read the story too often from Luke's account to see what Matthew really has to say. He makes no overt claim of Mary's purity. He explains nothing as to how this child was conceived. He does not even mention any element of Mary's visitation by some divine messenger. "It just became obvious to everyone that she was pregnant when she should not be, and somehow God blessed her in just that condition!" This is gospel: God took all that circumstance of disgrace, disrepute, and dishonor, to

transform it all into a message of hope, joy, and forgiveness for one and all! God chose to bless this young girl and entire nation from the midst of a fallen condition. Joy is born amid turmoil and despair.

We should perhaps have started the story at a different place. Matthew did not start with Mary, but with Joseph's ancestry. Right off the bat, he refers to four women in Joseph's lineage. These are not women of stellar reputation and purity in the eyes of society. Tamar deceived her father-in-law, to have his child, when he had refused her rightful marriage to his son. Rahab was a harlot from Jericho, likely involved in the temple prostitution of fertility cults. Ruth was foreigner from Moab, involved herself with Boaz before their marriage. Bathsheba was taken by David, who plotted her husband's death. We tend to overlook this background, but the line of David to which Joseph clings is not one of a morally stellar reputation. From such a sordid line, however, Joy is born!

In spite of all this sordid history, God chose to intervene and conceive blessing amid the turmoil, chaos, and distortions of sinful human affairs. Sin is not so much a problem for God, but a problem of our own. It saddens God, who desires something much better for us. It does not, however, seem to cause God to recoil. Rather, it is in our sinful state that we recoil from God—the same God who in grace extends an offer of joyous blessing amid the destruction in our own lives.

Matthew continues his story with Joseph. He seems unconcerned with Mary, though in our context of freely looking at new possibilities to women, we clearly see and discuss the problems Mary faced. Matthew is much more concerned with the story's impact on Joseph, and Joseph's response.

Joseph looked upon Mary's pregnancy with concern. By all rights, this would be no birth to celebrate. It would not be fitting for him to accept her as his wife. Such would tarnish his own reputation. The accepted thing to do would be to expose her to public disgrace and salvage his own social standing. More graceful, he chose to relinquish rights to her in a quiet manner and get on with looking for a new wife. Grace stepped in anew. Matthew records an angel appearing to Joseph, encouraging him to go ahead with the marriage and accept God's blessing on their union, in spite of impending social disgrace. Somehow, God had blessed the child in Mary's womb, and this child would be the savior of the people.

It took courage for Joseph to assume the charge placed on him. He was charged with naming this child conceived out of wedlock. Before the people, such an act would claim this child as his own. All would know Mary as mother. In naming the child, however, Joseph would state before all that this would be his own son. Regardless of modern paternity issues, the naming was a declaration of paternity for all legal concerns. Far from writing Mary out of his life, his charge was to claim her and her unborn child as his own.

In spite of looming social disaster; in spite of ridicule; in spite of any reputation of righteousness; in spite of the social and religious expectations placed on him, Joseph was to accept this child as his own and blessed by God's grace. It could well be a scandal, but he was to look upon the child as a joyous blessing. The difference did not lie in any outward appearance. The difference lay in the manner of one's response. Mary and Joseph had the decision to see their circumstance in the eyes of society or in the light of God's grace. Faith claims God has a special purpose in the birth of Christ, regardless of life's circumstances. Will we choose to recognize the birth of joy—God's grace amid life's turmoil?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*