

# ***“Connecting the Dots”***

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***We live the dots, but only Jesus can connect them.***

***Matthew 1:18-25***

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## ***The pivotal moment***

What a year 2020 has been! Impeachment. Wildfires. Hurricanes. Protests. Pandemic. Quarantine. Stock market plummet and rebound. Sports and entertainment shut down or playing in empty venues. Supreme Court and election drama.

What was the most pivotal moment for you in 2020? For me personally it's hard to beat our daughter getting married – twice in the same year to the same guy. In ministry, it was the decision to shut the doors and offer live-stream only worship on March 15.

What one event would you pick from the Bible where everything changed? It has to be what happened in Matthew 1:18-25. It's not just my opinion. J. M. Roberts, writing in *A Short History of the World*, is offering a purely secular perspective when he says, “No single event in ancient times and perhaps none in the whole of human history is as important as the birth of the man whose name passed into history as Jesus.”

Last week's narrative sermon was inspired by a conversation with Kevin Watkins. Sunday afternoon I listened to Kevin's own first person sermon from his preaching class. It was a sermon about Joseph, so I asked him to share it with you this morning.

## ***Matthew – Kevin Watkins***

On behalf of the people of Nazareth, I want to say welcome to town. We are excited for you to be a part of our town. Thank you for coming by my family's shop and,

in particular, I am thankful to get to tell you my story first, before you hear from anyone else.

As you will soon find out that in our small town of only 500 people, stories travel fast. Eight months ago I got the worst news of my life, I'll never forget that conversation with Mary and her parents...

Oh wait, let me go back just a little further, I am sorry I am nervous. My name is Joseph Jacobson and my dad Jacob is the town carpenter.

Since I was 13, I have been working with my dad, learning from him how to make ladders, yokes, plows, threshing sledges, pitch-forks, and carts. You see most people in town are farmers growing almonds, pomegranates, and dates, making oil and wine. When they need something for their farms they come to us.

For the last seven years, I have been learning, working, and saving so that I could honor God and my family by starting my own household, getting married, having kids, and teaching them to love the laws of God and to keep them.

About a year ago, I finally saved up enough money to start my own household and my dad entered into an agreement with farmer Heli and his wife for me to marry their daughter Mary. My family and Heli and his family had a great dinner together as we celebrated my engagement to Mary.

I didn't know Mary super well. I mean I knew her. Again we live in a small town. Our families would travel up together to Jerusalem for the festivals. My father and I made a new yoke for them last year and I delivered it to their house.

So I knew her a little, but after talking with Heli and even having a few family meals together, what I knew about Mary was that she loved God, she seemed thoughtful, not forcing herself into conversation but having meaningful things to say when she did speak.

I found myself just thinking, I would like to get to know her more. And I was going to. In a little less than a year, she would be my wife. Praise be to God for all of all my hard work was finally paying off. My plans and dreams for my life were all coming true! Until...

Eight months ago on a Friday afternoon I got a message from Heli that he needed me to come to house. I didn't know if it was a work thing or a Mary thing, but either way, I rushed over to his house to honor him and help him if I could.

I will never forget his face when he saw me. He looked mad, sad, and a little sick all at once. He invited me into his house. I could tell something horrible had happened and then he said Mary has something to tell you. Mary walked in and, contrary to Heli's face, she seemed timid, but not embarrassed or ashamed. There was something else in

her voice - pride, excitement, and faith. Mary then said the three words that changed my life forever. "I am pregnant."

What? I was speechless.

When I didn't say anything, she went on to say that an angel appeared to her and told her not to be afraid, but that she had found favor in God's eyes. "You will conceive and give birth to a son," the angel had continued, "and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

God was fulfilling his promise to Abraham through her - God was still writing his story and she was invited into it. She was to be the mother of the messiah and God's Spirit had put a baby inside her.

I wish I could tell you that I said something wise or kind or even something angry, just anything, but it was all too much. What kind of story was this? The household, the wife, the kids, the chance to honor God was gone. My story had been hijacked by Mary and this news. Mary was supposed to help fulfill my dreams, but instead, she was wrecking them.

I just turned my back on Mary and walked out of the house, but not before Heli stopped me, stepped in front of me and very matter-of-factly said that he would understand whatever choice I made now in divorcing his daughter and that was it.

I walked right out of their house, I left, and didn't go home, I went outside the town and sat down and watched the sun go down over the valley below. It was one of those beautiful sunsets that makes God more real and close to you. Yet I felt very alone. I sat there and all kinds of things went through my head.

How could she do this? The story of my life that I had been working so hard to write had been hijacked by Mary's promiscuity, by this pregnancy. What would my parents say? What would my friends say? How long until everyone knew? Why would Mary do this? This isn't who I thought Mary was. I thought she was thoughtful and interesting and faithful. I had genuinely been interested in getting to know her more. Was I not man enough? Who could it have been? Who is the other guy? And why would she make up that story? To be promiscuous is one thing, but what about that ridiculous story? It was impossible. There hasn't been a prophet in Israel for 400 years.

She said the angel told her the baby in her would be the messiah. Is she mocking God? Does she really think that her baby is a boy sent from God to restore his people to national independence and to our rightful place as the people of God? God why is this all happening?

I started to run through my options for divorce. The old way, from Deuteronomy 22, would be a stoning. No one did this anymore, but that story she was telling, blaspheming God, I don't know maybe that is best. We must protect the name of the Lord.

My next option, based on Deuteronomy 24:1, was a public trial. She has committed adultery and is guilty. She and her family would be shamed, but it is better than stoning. This is what I should do, but Heli has been great to me and, though she doesn't deserve it, I don't want this either. I don't want to tear our town apart and, dang it, I do love her.

Finally, this Scripture came to my mind, The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. And I want to be too, so I decided I would divorce her quietly. That night I went to sleep exhausted, but resolved.

I had a dream and what happened makes me just as crazy as Mary. An Angel of God appeared and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary for your wife." The Angel said God is still writing His story and you are invited. The Lord has a role for you. Your role is different from Mary's or from the role of your father or mother. Your role is to care for and protect Mary, to adopt the son I put in her into your family, into the family of David. You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

I woke up. I woke up from my sleep and I woke to a new life. My plans, my story had been completely rewritten. I did what the angel told me to do. I married Mary and no – it wasn't the party I thought it would be. I didn't get to celebrate with my family and friends, because (to be honest) they didn't approve. I married Mary and I adopted Jesus into my family, into the family of David. God has invited me into his story and I have a role to play. Even though it wasn't what I thought it would be, I am going to play it as best I can with His help.

I am just a young carpenter in a small town of 500 people who was betrothed to a farmer's daughter. And I long to be faithful to God. After hundreds and thousands of years, it turns out that God is still writing his story and it includes me. And I venture to say it includes you. How is God including you in His story? What is your role to play?

Mary is going to have her baby in three weeks, and when she does I am going to do what the angel said, and name him "Jesus." I wonder what he will be like. What will he look like? What will his voice sound like? Will he be a normal kid? I hope I can keep him safe. As the Messiah, will Jesus lead an army against Rome? How will he rescue us? What does it mean that he will save men from their sins?

I have so many questions, and I guess I will have to wait and see. But I know this one thing, God is still writing History and it includes me and it includes you.

## ***God has a face***

Every year for three decades at Corinth and my last church, during the Christmas Eve service I have sung a song written by Michael Card to reflect Joseph's perspective:

*How could it be, this baby in my arms, sleeping now so peacefully?  
"The Son of God," the angel said. How could it be?  
Lord, I know he's not my own – not of my flesh, not of my bone.  
Still, Father, let this baby be the son of my love.*

Both Michael Card and Kevin place more questions than answers in Joseph's mouth. In truth, we don't know what Joseph said. There are zero Joseph quotations in the Bible. But we think he had, because he *must* have had, lots of questions.

What we know about him is his character – before and after he knew about Mary's baby. We preachers like to tell stories about bad people God changed, and insecure people God used. Joseph's story reminds us that God uses "righteous" people. Don't go immediately to the fact that we're all sinners, so Joseph was too. Of course.

Matthew doesn't go there. Matthew tells us Joseph is a *good* guy. He loves God. He obeys God's word. In the one pivotal moment of his life, when he is caught between what Max Lucado says is "what God says and what makes sense," he agonizes. He's trapped between justice – what Mary deserves, even according to the Bible – and mercy – how to demonstrate God's gracious and compassionate character.

I'm so glad we have Matthew's version of the birth story. Luke tells us so much about Mary. God chose Mary, and she was a perfect choice, but God also chose Joseph. Can you imagine Jesus being raised in a home where his father-figure wasn't someone who loved God's law and sought to order his life by it? Or in a home where Joseph either wasn't there – because he had divorced Mary – or was insecure and bitter about this son that was "not of flesh, not of my bone"? God chose Joseph.

We often say that justice and mercy met at the cross. That is ultimately and absolutely true. But justice and mercy's collision is foreshadowed in Joseph.

Still, there's no way that Joseph could have all his questions answered. It would not be possible for him to connect the dots. As Kevin reminded us, all the angel can tell him at this point is that his story is part of a larger Story of what God is doing. That's our primary practical encouragement from Joseph. We just have to do the next right thing, the next loving thing. Sometimes the right thing and the loving thing seem to collide.

We need not wait until all the dots connect and the picture comes into focus. God connected only two dots for Joseph – Mary's pregnancy and God's salvation story. Matthew, writing decades later, connects the dot with Isaiah 7:14 – "A virgin will conceive and bear a son. You will call his name 'Emmanuel,' God with us."

Please don't spend a lot of time attacking or defending, as some do, Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14. After Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and after Pentecost and the early church's reflection on who Jesus truly is, Matthew is connecting so many more dots than anyone could connect at the time. This is work of God.

We live our stories forward, but we only understand them backward, maybe not even in this life. We live the dots, but only Jesus can connect them. The Old Testament is full of stories of men and women who "were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised" (Hebrews 11:39). Joseph died before he ever heard one sermon that Jesus preached or witnessed the first miracle.

Matthew, however, wants to connect the Most Important Dot early in his Gospel. In last week's passage he gave us Jesus' legal genealogy – that he was the "Son of David," rightful heir to the throne, the long-awaited Messiah. Now Matthew previews the heart of his Gospel – that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means, "God with us."

We may wonder why the virgin birth (or, more properly, virgin conception) gets no mention anywhere in the New Testament except Matthew and Luke. The answer is not because it's unimportant. It's because it's really a story for those who can connect more dots. It can actually be distracting for inquirers or new believers. The fact that Jews were the first to embrace a fully human being they had personally encountered as God is truly remarkable. If God had wanted simply to be recognized as "a god" who took human form, he would have entered in a Greek or Roman culture. They had all sorts of stories like that. A Jew steeped in Scripture would never, ever make it up.

Without "God with us," the birth of Jesus is definitely not a pivotal moment in the history of the world. Without that truth, Jesus is a relatively minor nutcase, a legend who might have drawn a following for a while but who was ultimately executed shamefully and painfully. But if he is "God with us," we have to deal with him.

If the eternal and all-powerful Creator of the universe who big banged the world into existence became a living, breathing, fully human being, we can't ignore him. He truly is not only history's pivot point, he is history's meaning and goal. Joseph didn't understand all that; he didn't need to. Matthew did, and he doesn't want you to miss it.

Matthew has so much more to tell his readers, but the Holy Spirit made sure that Joseph's story not only fronted Matthew's gospel, but the entire New Testament. This is the first of many dots Matthew will connect between what we call the Old Testament and Jesus' story. But none is more important than this one: this baby is "God with us."

You need never live another day thinking of God as a remote, angry, impersonal, or indifferent force. God has a face, and he's a baby, then a boy, a teenager, a young adult, a model human being, a fellow sufferer, someone who prays and waits and trusts when God turns his face and his friends desert him. "God with us" knows your story and has already lived it. Connecting his dots to yours gives your life purpose. Amen.