

+ Matthew 1:18-25 + Series: Who Is Coming? + Theme: The Son Is Saving! +
+ 4th Sunday in Advent + 18 December 2016 +

Why is it so hard to trust? As children, we didn't hesitate to trust what our parents or teachers or most other grown-ups said. We trusted that what they said was true and that they would keep their promises. We trusted that they would not lie and that they always had our best interests in mind.

...But why is it so hard to trust now that we're grown up? People we trusted broke promises. Perhaps someone lied to us or we witnessed them lie to others. Some things they told us proved to be false or others led us to question the things they said. As we grew up, we learned how selfish or self-centered people can be. People we trusted failed us or we failed them.

Sadly, every one of us experiences that as we grow up. It's the reality of living in a sinful world with our own naturally selfish natures interacting with a world full of naturally selfish people. Then you mix into that common human experience years of examples where long-trusted institutions or people entrusted with great authority break that trust in spectacular ways.

People seek the highest offices in the land at any cost. Trusted financial experts use others' hard-earned money to line their own pockets. Companies and financial institutions prove to be culturally rotten from the core. As for the media? Well, a recent poll shows that 94% of Americans have little to no confidence in what the mainstream media reports.

Even organized religion and the Christian church is viewed with a jaded eye that sees churches focus too much on politics or social issues or not being completely honest with their ministry techniques or simply feeding people a watery baby food of generic spirituality. Then you have all the fallout from years of clergy scandals, and you wonder, "Who can you trust?"

It is so easy to get cynical, isn't it? We live in a world that feeds our natural skepticism about everything. Check out the headlines since the election and you can see how terribly skeptical our culture is. How quickly do you slip into thinking the worst about someone or some situation because there's got to be something wrong you don't know? You assume a criminal element or a self-seeking desire for attention. You automatically doubt, because what you see seems too good to be true, too bright for this world of darkness, too pure for this world awash in cynicism. So who or what can you trust?

Imagine what was going through the mind of Joseph the carpenter when Mary, his virgin bride-to-be, informed him that she was expecting a child—and he wasn't the father. Mary told him what had happened, "An angel appeared to me. He told me that I'm going to be **with child through the Holy Spirit** and give birth to a son. Not just any child, but **the Son of the Most High**. This child will be called **the Son of God**." (Luke 1:32,35) Um, what? You can't blame Joseph for doubting. It had been at least 400 years since the Lord had spoken through or to anyone. Why would he start now? It didn't seem to add up.

Surely the doubt that Joseph felt was followed by shock and pain and disappointment. You see, Joseph was **"pledged to be married"** to Mary. That meant that their two families had come together and discussed a marriage. After negotiations were complete, Joseph and Mary had signed a contract for the bride price and the conditions of their marriage. They were then regarded as husband and wife in Nazareth, but the actual marriage celebration would not follow until a year after the arrangement. This would allow the family time to prepare everything needed for a marriage. After that, their married life together would begin when Joseph welcomed Mary into his home following a big, days-long celebration.

Joseph wanted to know the truth. If Mary had committed the serious sin of adultery, according to Mosaic Law, she could be publicly disgraced and even stoned to death. That she had become pregnant by the Holy Spirit didn't even register with Joseph. He wasn't ready to believe that this unborn child was actually the promised Messiah. He simply wanted the truth and his natural instinct to be skeptical only questioned Mary's news all the more.

Joseph **"was a righteous man"**—a faithful Old Testament believer from little on. He cared very much for his wife. Joseph **"did not want to expose her to public disgrace..."** So he planned to legally end their marriage hoping to minimize her disgrace and maintain a godly life himself. **"He had in mind to divorce her quietly."** To do so would've broken their marriage vows, but it would've prevented Mary from great disgrace and even death. She still would have to deliver and raise the child on her own—since conception by the Holy Spirit wasn't a logical possibility. Joseph could continue his life as a poor carpenter and perhaps marry again someday.

Yet as righteous as Joseph's plans seemed, he didn't realize what his natural skepticism was actually doing. In spite of Joseph's good intentions, he didn't realize that his doubt was blocking the way of the coming Savior. By his actions, Joseph would've abandoned Jesus before his birth and would've legally made the child illegitimate without a father. Joseph's natural doubt of what Mary had told him left his heart unready for the coming of the Savior. God himself had to clear the way for Joseph to trust that the Lord was accomplishing a great miracle inside Mary.

Perhaps it was the night before Joseph was going to divorce Mary. We don't know when the Lord removed his doubt, but an angel did come to Joseph in a dream with a special message from God himself. ***"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*** Through that message, through that Word, the Lord transformed Joseph's doubts about Mary's faithfulness into trust.

Joseph finally understood what he had longed to hear ever since his parents had first taught him about God's promise of a Savior. The Messiah was almost here! By marrying Mary, Joseph would become the legal father of her son—making Jesus legitimate according to the Law. Joseph would also share in her disgrace as neighbors and friends wondered why he married her if he wasn't obligated to do so. Joseph would deliver the Messiah, name him Jesus, and raise him. This faithful Old Testament believer was suddenly filled with hope and excitement for the birth of his soon-to-be adopted Son.

The Apostle Matthew points out that this child, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, would be the fulfillment of a prophecy Isaiah made 750 years before. ***"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means 'God with us.'"*** Joseph realized that this child would be God in human flesh and would make his dwelling in a sinful world to save sinful humanity. Immanuel was coming!

So how did Joseph respond? The Lord had filled his heart with eager and confident trust in his Word. He had to act. Immediately after he woke up, Joseph ***"did what the angel of the Lord had commanded and took Mary home as his wife."*** He didn't hesitate. He wasn't going to let his doubts stand in the Lord's way anymore. He knew Isaiah's promise and therefore had no sexual relations with his wife until after Jesus' birth. There would be no doubt whose son Jesus was—the Son of God. At the child's birth, Joseph ***"gave him the name Jesus."*** Imagine how Joseph celebrated as he held "God with us" in his arms and sang his own Savior to sleep!

In a culture where there is so much that isn't what it seems, you can understand why we are naturally skeptical, but what about when it comes to trusting God or his Word or his promises? Why don't you trust God? Why don't I trust God's Word? Why don't I trust that God can actually make a difference in my life or in my family or in my relationships or in my marriage or in my future? Why are you so quick to not trust him? Perhaps it's fear because if you trust God and his Word, it means that you have to leave control of your life, control of your future in his hands. It also means that if I trust God and his Word, I might have to have difficult, uncomfortable conversations with people I care about. Perhaps it's pride because you think that you can stand on your own two feet and carry whatever weight is placed on your shoulders. Perhaps it's pessimism or cynicism because you think that God is going to fail you and break his promises to you just like so many other people in your life. It's no wonder that we don't naturally trust God or his Word.

So what does God say about your fear? ***"So do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God."*** (Isaiah 41:10) What does God say about my pride? ***"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor me."*** (Psalm 50:15) What does God say about your pessimism? ***"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."*** (Matthew 28:20b)

As you hear what God says, do you hear the voice of Immanuel? ***"I am with you..."*** Do you hear the voice of your Savior? ***"I will deliver you..."*** Listen to the Lord like Joseph did so long ago and see what God is doing for you! Listen as he transforms your doubts into trust. See the Son of God and Mary's Son save you from your skepticism, your cynicism, your jaded worldview. See the Son of God keep promise after promise—born in Bethlehem; descended from David; keeping God's holy Law even though he wrote it himself; offering himself as God's sacrificial lamb on the cross, yet removing the sting and victory of death by rising on the third day; ascended into heaven; and guiding all things for your good and mine. See the Son save you like he did Joseph 2,000 years ago!

...But God isn't speaking to you through an angel in a dream. He speaks to you through his Word. He shows you what he has accomplished and he makes promises that Immanuel—"God with us"—can make and keep.

So with a heart full of trust in God and his Word, how will you respond? We will respond with a trust that acts. We will respond with a confident desire to serve our Lord whether that's in our families or marriages, in our workplace, in our communities, and in our church. We will respond not with a naïve view of the world around us, but with a realistic understanding that the people and the world around us are sinful—just as we are—yet also trusting the Lord, who never breaks a promise, who never fails us, who removes our fear or pride or pessimism, and who is “God with us” every step of the way.

Who can you trust? Don't put all your trust in rulers or mortal human beings or human institutions. We know all too well that in this sinful world, they can and will fail us. Instead trust in Jesus—the Son who saves. Trust in his unfailing Word. Trust in Immanuel, for God is with us and will be forever. Amen.