

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in Heaven and from Immanuel,
the God with Us, amen.

Put yourself in the place of Joseph for a moment... “What should I do?
Joseph asks himself... Mary’s been unfaithful to me! Three months ago she went
to visit her relatives in Judea, and how she comes back pregnant.” Sometimes we
so sanitize the birth of Jesus, turning it into a child’s bedtime story, we forget the
real-life people and their struggles. Even worse, we forget the miracle or at least
fail to fully appreciate and value just how astounding and earth-shattering the
wonder and mystery of that birth was and still is today. It’s not just another birth.
It’s not simply the miracle of life. It’s not just one more difficult pregnancy or
delivery. Our daughter, Niki sees these kind of miracles every day as she works
with tiny premature babies in the NICU at Miami Valley Hospital... Even the
word miracle fails to bring home to us what a great and mighty wonder this birth
is. Niki gets to see the everyday, run of the mill miracles as those one pound
babies grow and begin to flourish. That’s not what happened 2000 years ago...
It’s so much greater than turning water into wine or healing the sick or walking on
the sea or calming a storm or even raising the dead.

Some of our best loved Christmas carols place the miracle right in front of
our eyes... “Round yon virgin mother and child. Holy Infant, so tender and
mild...” How can anyone be a virgin mother? That’s biologically impossible. Or

a holy infant? We're all born sinners. Do you see the wonder? Do you feel the mystery of what God has done? Some of my favorite words from any Christmas Carol ever are from Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Not because I change those words to Hark Harold, the Angel Sings in memory of my own father, Harold... Listen to these lyrics... "Veiled in flesh the God head see, Hail th'incarnate Deity! Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!" What a commentary on that name Immanuel! As we place ourselves with Joseph today, let's contemplate the wonder of that name: Immanuel. Why is this Baby Immanuel?

Let's look a little closer... Joseph was betrothed to Mary. That's more than a modern "getting engaged." They had made legally binding promises to be husband and wife. The time of betrothal was between the time when the marriage vows were said and the time when the marriage home was completely finished and ready for the new couple to move in. This could be a few days or many weeks. The marriage wasn't consummated until the couple moved in together. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but he had not yet taken her home. There was no way she could be pregnant by him. So, what was he to do? Only a divorce could break a betrothal. Should he pretend this was no big deal and go ahead with the marriage? No, that wouldn't be right. Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man. Most "righteous" men would insist on their "rights" under the law. That would have meant Joseph would have been within his "rights" to publicly accuse Mary of

infidelity and she would have been stoned to death... That was the law... That would vindicate him. On the other hand, Joseph's public accusation would destroy her life, condemning her as an adulteress! Joseph's righteousness exceeded that of all the religious leaders and law makers of his day. His righteousness was a sort of divine righteousness, which always leads us to do the kind and loving thing rather than what is "right" or permissible under the law... So, Joseph decided to use the lax divorce laws, like our no-fault divorce. Then Mary wouldn't be exposed to greater public shame. That is until he was paid a visit by an angel in a dream...

Maybe we wonder why Mary didn't tell him about the angel Gabriel appearing to her, telling her that the power of the Most High would overshadow her and the holy one to be born would be called the Son of God. Let's think that scenario through... What would you have thought, if you were Joseph and Mary came to you with this tall tale about being pregnant by God's Holy Spirit? We'd have thought, "It's bad enough you were unfaithful and broke our betrothal, but now to drag in the Lord into this with a preposterous story to try and cover up your sin, how blasphemous!" So, Mary trusted The Lord and left it in the Lord's hands.

As God had planned out from all eternity and revealed through the prophets, the Christ would come into this world in a most astounding and yet lowliest of ways. Born in the lowliest of conditions, with only an animal's feeding trough for a bed, this birth could not have gotten any lower. The Almighty God, who holds

the universe in his hands, through whom all things were created, born in a smelly, dirty, messy animal feeding trough! He didn't come in divine glory or with heavenly majesty, but as a helpless infant in a messy manger.

Yet how astounding! This baby has no biological father. If you remember your biology class, the genetics of X and Y chromosomes, there is no way, not even with cloning, for a female to produce a male. All that is wrapped up in a single word, virgin. We so easily gloss over that one single word without appreciating the astounding miracle worked by the Holy Spirit. Here's the kicker, this whole event was foretold by the prophet Isaiah 700 years before Mary even met Joseph! "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son".

As astounding as the virgin birth is, it's not the greatest miracle or wonder God worked here. It's only the vehicle God used to work a far, far greater miracle. What you might be asking is the great and mighty wonder surpassing all miracles, this mystery beyond mystery... In a word: Immanuel, which means: God with us. Yes, dear friends, Immanuel. "God with us." God in the flesh. God incarnate. How can the eternal, almighty, omnipresent God take a full human nature, body and soul, into his person? How can he be both the Son of God and the Son of Man? How can his humanity not be consumed by his divinity? How can his divinity not be corrupted by his humanity? How can he remain fully divine while also at the same time being fully human? How can the Word, who is with God and

is God, become flesh? How can he be Immanuel, “God with us.” God veiled in the flesh? What a great and mighty wonder!

Try pondering that mystery today as you eat his body and drink his blood in the Lord’s Supper. For only Immanuel, God in the flesh, could be with us in such a marvelous and mysterious way. Ponder that as you come again to the manger this Christmas with Mary and listen again to the shepherds tell of the angel’s message. This Baby is Christ, the Lord -- yes, the Lord God Almighty. He is Immanuel, God with us, God in the flesh, born of the virgin. What a great and mighty wonder! But why? Why did he come as Immanuel? The name Joseph was to give him answers that question.

Joseph was to take Mary home as his wife -- not to cover up an illegitimate birth, but to serve as the earthly guardian, the legal father for this Christ-child. In his God-given role as the child’s legal father, he was to give him the name. Mathew’s Gospel begins with the genealogy showing how Jesus, through his adopted Father Joseph, traces his identity all the way back to Abraham, the Father of our Faith. Joseph, who we often ignore because he wasn’t the biological baby daddy, through his name, gives legitimacy to Jesus taking on the throne of Israel’s best loved and most famous King, King David. More than just giving this baby his lineage, Joseph obeys the Angel and names the child Jesus, which means God Saves. For that’s why he came into this world: to save his people from their sins.

The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “the LORD saves” or “the LORD is salvation.” What a fitting name for our Savior! Notice how the angel is specific: “he will save his people from their sins.” Those last little words reveal why God put on the veil of human flesh. He came to deal with our sin, our separation from God. You and I were born as rebels; our sinful minds hostile toward God, warring against the very God who created us. Our sin condemns us to death and damnation -- endless darkness, and separation from God. Yet, this very God, whom you rebelled against, came to save you. He is Jesus, Christ our Lord and our Savior! He is the only-begotten Son of the Father begotten, not made, from eternity with God. He is Jesus, Immanuel. He came to be with us and to save us!

So, this Christmas, dear friends, as the Christmas carols ring out and the name Immanuel sounds out, contemplate that most marvelous of mysteries we celebrate at Christmas. This Baby is our God. He is Immanuel, God with us. He is our God in the flesh, born of the virgin. He is our Jesus, who to save us. May this Jesus bring you joy, peace and salvation not just at Christmas time, but every day of your life. Thank be to our amazing and awesome God, Amen.