

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon Title: Fear Not

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### Scripture:

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Matthew 1: 18-25

#### Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about<sup>[a]</sup>: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet<sup>[a]</sup> did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>[a]</sup> because he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"<sup>[a]</sup> (which means "God with us").

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

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**Transcript:**

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Well, when I was seven years old, my family and I, we moved to a new neighborhood and the new house had a shower stall, which I had never seen before. And my brother and I got the idea that we could fill it up and turn it into a swimming pool. And when I say we, I mean me because my brother was only five, so it was mostly me.

So, one night when my dad was out of town, we put on our swimsuits and got in the shower and blocked the drain with a bunch of towels, but it didn't fill up. So we said, and by we, I mean me, "Let's just give it more time." About 15 minutes later, we heard my mother scream and we opened the shower door and to find that the whole entire basement of our brand new house was flooded in about an inch of water.

And, oh my goodness, I got a tongue lashing that I still remember. It was impressed on me and the rest of the night from our rooms to which we had been sent, we had to listen to our mother crying as she took towels to soak up the water, threw it in the washing machine on the spin cycle to dry them out and then repeated the process all night long.

And when my dad finally came home, he said, "Well, why didn't you just call the fire department? They can handle things like this." And my mom said, "Well, we just moved here and I didn't want all the neighbors, fire trucks in front of our house in the middle of the night, who knows what the neighbors would've thought." And she was actually kind of right, because that was a really gossipy neighborhood that liked to make up a lot of stories. So she was right. But I think that really shows the power of what other people think of us, what power that has over us. How far we will go to earn people's approval and avoid their disapproval.

The last few weeks we've been looking at the fear not passages in the Christmas story in the Bible. And one of the fears we have is about what other people think about us. We fear social rejection. Every person has this fear. I mean, even if there's a whole bunch of kinds of people, you don't care what they think about you. We all have some group of people whose approval we want and whose disapproval we fear. And this is deep in us. Part of how we survived as a species was working together. Alone we can't defeat the tiger or the lion, but together we can, safety is in the tribe.

And so we fear rejection from the tribe. We feel being an outcast. So we want to win the approval, particularly of people in our tribe, our school friends or work colleagues or political tribe or whatever it is. So we make sure that we dress in a way that impresses other people, that we have the right look on social media, achieve in sports, in school or work, so other people would admire us.

We will go along with the crowd and do things we know are not right, just so that we can fit in and not feel like we have been outcast. We fear what other people think about us. And that fear controls us and it keeps us from living the life, the bigger life that God calls us to. And I know this is a battle for me. I sometimes think I'm too worried sometimes about what other people think of me, which when you're in a public role is really hard because people talk about you when you are in a public role and it's not always accurate. I am amazed sometimes at what I have supposedly said. I heard that you said... "No, I didn't say anything like that."

I got an email a while back from someone who said that I am leading people to worship the antichrist. Okay, just for the record, I am anti antichrist, okay? Let's just settle that rumor right there, I am anti antichrist.

However, over the years I have been getting progressively free of the fear, the bondage of the fear of what other people will think of me. And it is bondage because see, God has a plan for your life and so does everybody else, right? God has a plan for your life, and so do your teachers, so do your parents, so do your friends, so do your work colleagues, your kids, God has a plan for your life and so does everyone else. The question is whose plan is going to lead to more meaning, purpose and joy? Rhetorical question, you're in a church. The answer is God.

The text we read today gives us some clues of how to get freedom from worrying about what other people think of us. And it said, This is how the birth of Jesus came about. His mother, Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit."

So what you need to know is that back then engagement was a more serious commitment than it is in our culture. It would last about a year. And to get out of it, you couldn't just break up, you had to actually get a divorce. It was just as binding as marriage, only you

couldn't sleep together, which doesn't seem fair does it? But that's how it was. Now Mary in this story, Mary is a Virgin. It's a miraculous pregnancy, right? She was not unfaithful to Joseph, but try telling that to Joseph, right? I mean, "No, really Joseph, no, it was a miracle, really."

One of our staff sent me a TikTok video of a man and imagining how parts of this conversation between Joseph and Mary might have gone, take a look at this.

Fresh baked pie just for you.

Where did you get this?

I baked it from scratch.

We don't have an oven.

God helped me.

Joseph, please-

You see how that sounds, Mary?

You can see why Joseph was struggling with this, right? You understand Joseph. And the text says, because Joseph did not want to expose Mary to ridicule or to disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. And right here, Joseph is about to sweep Jesus right out of his life because of fear. And he's about to reject this gift that God is trying to give him.

He's a good man, he clearly loves Mary. He doesn't want to disgrace her, so he is going to divorce her quietly. But there is something else at work here and we know that because the angel shows up in a dream and says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, do not be afraid." In other words, Joseph, your problem isn't Mary, your problem is that you're afraid. And because of your fear you are about to miss a miracle. You're about to miss what God is doing because of your fear of what other people are going to think. Because see, in this culture, Mary would be considered shamed, a disgrace. And if Joseph marries her, he's going to be considered a disgrace as well.

And the angel says, "You're about to miss this amazing miracle and God wants you to be part of it. And you're about to reject this gift." See, to really experience the power of Jesus. We have to have the courage to accept the world's disapproval. In this culture, as I said, Mary is disgraced. If Joseph marries her, he's disgraced. What's that going to do? That's going to affect his carpentry business, right? "Who's going to hire me now? My life will be ruined."

See sometimes God calls us to something controversial. If you say, "I have a relationship with Jesus." Some people are going to think you're a fool. If you refuse to go along with the gossip in your retirement community or at school or at work, some people are going to think you're not part of the gang. If you don't cave into pressure to drink too much or lie to make the quarterly earnings look better or whatever it is, some people are going to get mad about that. You may miss out on a promotion, you may lose a job, you may lose some friends.

Now I need to say very clearly, if we are being rejected, we need to make sure that it really is because of Jesus and what He has called us to not because we're being a jerk, right? Because there are some Christians they're angry, they're judgemental and people don't like them. And then they try to play the "I'm being persecuted for Jesus card." Oh, far out. You're being persecuted because you're a jerk, dude. Just don't be a jerk and people will be nicer to you. So we need to make sure we're not being, don't be a jerk. If you take home nothing else, don't be a jerk, okay?

But even when we're not being a jerk, if we're really going to experience the power of Jesus, we have to accept that some people are going to disapprove of us. They just will. However, there are some benefits to being willing to risk your reputation for Jesus. First thing is a lasting difference. Let me ask this. All of those small town gossips throw in shade at Mary and Joseph, what were their names? Oh, that's right, we don't know who those people are, do we? They're long forgotten, but everyone remembers these two poor teenage [peasants 00:08:59], right? Because God used them to make a lasting difference. Joseph asked to surrender every plan he had for his life. All his personal goals had to be set aside. And he did that because an angel showed up in a dream, not in-person, in a dream. How easy would that have been to dismiss? It took so much courage for both Mary and Joseph. And Joseph here, he gets to be the earthly father of God himself coming in human form, and part of this mission, that's going to change the world. One day he was an ordinary carpenter, the next day he woke up the earthly father of God himself in human form. Where is fear of what others think holding you back from God's bigger plan? Choose faith over fear and make a lasting difference. And I'll say how we do that in a minute. Second benefit to being willing to risk your reputation for Jesus is freedom. Whose disapproval do you fear? Whose approval are you seeking? Whoever that is, that person controls you. And the quickest way to forget what God thinks about you is to focus on what

others think about you. Instead of living life to an audience of one to God who loves us unconditionally.

So how do we do this? How do we break? How do we choose faith over fear? How do we break free of worrying, being afraid of what other people might think of us? Three things first, accept the adventure of Jesus Lordship.

Pastor Tim Keller points to an important detail in the text where the angel tells Joseph, "You will give him the name Jesus." That is, Joseph doesn't even get to name his own son. Didn't even get to name him. "Well, I was thinking, Fred, Lord." No, he doesn't even get to name him. And back then, this is hugely significant because naming wasn't just a label, it showed you had authority over something. And Joseph doesn't have authority to name his own son because his own son is his Lord and his savior. And He is our Lord. It's not the other way around. And He's not there to help me achieve my goals, He is there to empower me to achieve His, which are more exciting and bigger than any vision that I might have for my life.

He will take you to places that you can't even dream of. And they will be hard. They will be hard. And you may end up with more questions and sometimes and answers. Joseph right now, he has more questions than answers. "God, if you are so good, why are all these hard things happening? If I am doing Your will, then why is it so hard right now?" And when you are in those places, walk in the dark by what you have learned to be true in the light, that God is faithful, that He uses every bad thing for good. And that He will give you a bigger life than you ever would've chosen for yourself. And then just keep doing the next right thing and the next right thing and the next right thing. And putting pieces of a puzzle together, one at a time, God will eventually reveal the whole picture and it will be good. It may be hard, but it'll be good.

And part of how we keep doing the next right thing is knowing that God is doing something bigger, that we get to be a part of. What keeps Joseph going is he knows it's not just about him. He's part of something bigger that makes him willing to face the disapproval of others. One of the great heroes of the 20th century is Jackie Robinson. The first African American Major League Baseball player and he faced so much hate because of that anger and hate and death threats because people were just infuriated to have a black man in the Major Leagues. And one of the things that doesn't get talked about a lot was how much his faith in

Jesus gave him the courage to persevere. Knowing that Jesus had called him to this bigger thing to undo racism. And that enabled him to keep moving forward in the face of so much hate.

In fact, one of the reasons that the Brooklyn Dodgers Manager, Branch Rickey chose Jackie Robinson as the first black baseball player was because of Robinson's faith. Because Branch Rickey was also a strong Christian and he knew that whoever broke the color barrier would need that faith in Jesus, that he had been called to a higher purpose in order to do it. In fact, right before Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, there's a story about how he barged into his pastor's office one day, while the pastor's working, he said, "Don't let me distract you, just keep working. I hope you don't mind?" And Branch Rickey just paces back and forth in his pastor's office for like an hour. And then finally slammed his fist down on the pastor's desk and said, "I got it. I'm going to do it. I'm going to sign Robinson. But I had to come here to talk to God about it, because if I do this, he is going to face a firestorm of hate." And we both need to know that it is God calling us to this mission."

What part of what helped Jackie Robinson be such a brave hero is that he knew God had called him to a higher purpose to undo racism. And when you know you're part of something bigger, you're willing to face the disapproval of others, accept the Lordship of Jesus.

Second way. We get courage to live free of what others might think is to remember that God is the keeper of your reputation. As I said, nobody remembers the gossipers but everyone remembers Mary and Joseph because God kept their reputation. Now they didn't get to experience that in their lifetime. But nevertheless, He made their names live forever. God is the keeper of your reputation. And knowing that helps us move forward in the face of what others might think.

And then the third way to live free from fear of what others might think is to live from an experience of God's love. Take a look at the reason the angel gives Joseph not to fear. The angel says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife..." Because here's the reason not to fear, "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." Notice what the angel does not say. The angel does not say, "Don't be afraid, Joseph, because it's all going to turn out okay, you won't be mocked. I'm going to make sure you have wealth and health. You're going to be blessed. It's going to be awesome. Don't be

afraid, Joseph, I am going to make sure this all turns out just great for you." Where does the angel say that?

Nowhere.

Nowhere. In fact, it's the opposite, right? The angel basically says all those bad things you're worried about happening. "Yeah, they're going to happen Joseph, but don't be afraid." And somehow that changes Joseph, because he's experienced God's love. The angel say, "Jesus is going to pay the price for His people's sins." His people, we belong to Jesus. It's personal, it's not theological.

The text goes on to say, "This took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. And they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us." In every other religion, it's God over us, it's God above us. But God with us, that's personal. Joseph experiences Jesus love through what the angel says. Namely, that Jesus is coming to die for everyone's sins, including Joseph's because He loves him that much. And when you experience Jesus love it makes you braver, who cares what everyone else thinks, God loves me.

Years ago I told you about a friend, [Christine 00:16:11] I had in California, who I'm going to and call Sarah. And she engaged in lots of destructive behavior, drank to the point of blackout drunk a lot, used drugs. But then she started following Jesus because He offered forgiveness and second chances and because she experienced His love. And she wouldn't come to church though, because she was afraid of church people knew her life that they would reject her. But the more she felt Jesus love the more her life changed.

And she saw that her old life was making her miserable. So she started to tell all of her friends, "Hey, I really want to hang out with you, but just so you know, I'm not going to drink and I'm not going to use drugs anymore." They were not kind to her. They made fun of her. They got mad at her. "Oh, so what you think you're better than us now?" I mean, they were mad, but she had the courage to stand up to what they were saying because she felt Jesus love. But she still wouldn't go to church because she just didn't feel like she was the right church material. She didn't wear church clothes. She hadn't had a church life. She certainly didn't use church language. But eventually she decided to give church a try. But unfortunately on her third or fourth, Sunday at church, someone started talking to other people about how Sarah was dressed and how she should clean up her language and just kind of gossiping. All of which got back to Sarah, which made her furious.



And one day Sarah was telling about all this using vocabulary that was truly inventive. And she said, "I hate people like that church woman." Who had gossiped about her. "She should look up the word hypocrite in the dictionary, there'd be a picture of her right there. I hate it when people talk about other people behind their backs." Not noticing that she was talking about this woman behind this woman's back and she kind of went on and on.

And then finally she just kind of paused and said, "I don't know. All I know is I get up every single morning, I say thank you Jesus for dying for my sins because I sure do need it. And Jesus, you got to change me because if you can't change me, nobody can." And then she said, "I guess it's that way for everyone in church, isn't it? Even that church woman." And I said, "Yeah." And I said, "And don't listen to the church woman, she is sinning, she is in the wrong. You are not. She does not represent Jesus. You wear anything you want at church because He loves you just as you are."

And that shifted something for Sarah because a few months later she asked if I would baptize her in that same church in front of the entire congregation, which took some courage for her because she had experienced church as a place of judgment. But she had even more experience of Jesus love in a way that freed her to stand in front of that congregation, unafraid of what other people might think. Sarah experienced God's love directly through Jesus, but also through a community, through me and my wife and a few other people from that church, we showed her Jesus love.

She also knew that God was doing something bigger in her life and she wanted to be a part of that. All of which empowered her to live a different way in spite of the judgment of her old friends. And unfortunately in spite of the gossipy Victorian prudery of some church people.

So where are you caving into social pressure? Because we all do it, it's not just ex-drug use, drug users. We all do it. Where are you being held back from what God might want to do in your life because of fear of what others might think. At school or in your peer group or at work or retirement community or wherever you are, do not be afraid, the Lord Emmanuel is God with you and He loves you. And He wants to call you to a bigger life than you would ever imagine for yourself. You are your Father's daughter, you are your Father's son whom then shall you fear? Whom then shall you fear?

December 19, 2021

So Jesus, help us to get that in us and make us brave and willing to follow You and do things that You ask us to do, even if others disapprove, so that we can be part of Your rescue mission and live that bigger life You promise. We ask this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

## **Discussion Questions: Matthew 1: 18-25**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

### **Opening Questions:**

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

### **Scripture Reflection Questions:**

- What fears do you think Joseph had?
- What does the Angel say to Joseph in his dream, and why do you think it convinced Joseph to take Mary as his wife?
- Had you been Joseph, would what this Angel said to Joseph in a dream have convinced you? Why or why not?

### **Sermon Reflection Questions** - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- As a poor teenager, in the world's eyes Mary had no status or qualifications to play such a pivotal role in salvation history. What clues do you see in the text that may indicate why God chose her?
- What does it say about the character of God that he chose Mary for such an important role?
- How will this text shape what you think, feel, do this week?

### **Closing Question and Application:**

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

### **Closing Group Prayer:**

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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