

Matthew 1:18-25

December 18, 2022

It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year. Who would not agree with this classic Christmas song? Perhaps Mary and Joseph. For them it is not the most wonderful, but maybe even the worst time of the year.

Christmas begins, for them, with Joseph discovering that the young woman to whom he is betrothed is with child, and the child is not his. Can you even imagine how his heart is broken over this? But it gets worse. His beloved Mary breaks his heart even more by lying to him. She tells him that the child in her womb is a miracle. That no man was involved. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit who conceived this child in her womb. How hurt he is by this. How devastated by her lie. Still, out of love for her, he plans to divorce her not publicly, which would bring much shame upon her, but rather quietly, out of the public eye.

But then God intervenes. His angel tells Joseph in a dream that, indeed, the child to be born is a miracle. That it is the Holy Spirit who conceived this child in Mary's womb. How relieved Joseph is, but also how deeply ashamed of himself. For he had refused to believe his bride when she, indeed, was telling him the truth. He simply did not trust her. And how hurt Mary was that her beloved Joseph believed she had been unfaithful to her. He broke her heart by refusing to trust her. This is Christmas. It's how Christmas begins. The most wonderful time of the year? More like the most painful and sorrowful time when heartache, and blame, and guilt take over and dominate.

It's interesting that the world around us, which for the most part ignores Christ, tells us that Christmas is the time to put a smile on our face and a happy thought in our head. It's the time to put our troubles out of mind and get along with everyone.

Yet the picture that St. Matthew paints for us in our text, leaving us to fill in the details, is pretty much the opposite. The first Christmas, at least for Mary and Joseph, was not a Holly Jolly Christmas, but quite depressing and very painful.

And if they dealt with such struggles, why would we think that our Christmas time should be devoid of any troubles? That in this most wonderful time of the year problems magically go away, sinfulness and guilt disappear into thin air, and everybody, especially in families, suddenly embraces everybody else with love?

Here's the truth. You are not abnormal if you have heartache at Christmas time. You are not weird if, at this time of the year, you struggle with troubles, and sin, and guilt. Your family is not strange if there is strife and you all do not truly get along even in this Christmas season. If Mary and Joseph could struggle with all these, why can't we?

The solution is not what the world says it is. It's not to put our troubles behind us and suddenly change into better people, better family members. The solution is in the words the angel tells Joseph: *"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."*

This is the solution. It's all in His name. Jesus....Savior. *He will save His people from their sins.* Will Jesus keep sin and the troubles sin brings with it out of our lives? No. Will Jesus prevent us from having heartache and sorrow especially at Christmas time? No. Will Jesus turn our families into the Cleavers – Ward and June, Wally and Theodore – where every problem is solved within thirty minutes? Hardly.

Jesus does not make troubles, or even sin, disappear. Instead, He saves us from our sins. He tackles our sins head on. There is a price to be paid for sin. A horrible price. Death in hell for even one little sin. And Jesus pays that price. That's why He came at Christmas. Not to make us holly and jolly. To bear your sin, and mine, and the sin of the whole world including the sin and shame of Mary and Joseph. To take that sin to His cross, to suffer and die there, paying for it all.

That is how Jesus saves His people from their sins. And you are “His people.” Because you are baptized into Him, into His death and resurrection. His name was placed upon you when you were baptized. His cross was marked upon you.

This does not mean that your sins disappear into thin air. It means that God forgives your sins because they were laid upon Jesus. He forgives you. And not if you have a smile on your face and try to get along with your family. God forgives you for the strife that you brought into your family, for blaming others for that strife, for hurting your loved ones by your words and actions, and inactions.

He forgave Mary and Joseph for all this, and because He did, they could forgive each other. That's how sin goes away. Not by ignoring it and hiding it. By confessing it and by taking it to the cross of Jesus and believing that He truly does forgive you. By trusting that your baptism is still at work and that all your sin is washed away.

I imagine we will have more people in the pews on Christmas Eve, and that's good. And they will hear Luke's Christmas story where, besides frightened shepherds, the worst thing that we're told about is that there was no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph. If your life, including your family life, is pretty much problem free like that, then you will relate more to St. Luke's telling of Christmas. But I, for one, appreciate St. Matthew. Jesus was born into a world filled with sin and troubles, into a family dealing with sin and troubles. And that is every family on earth including mine and yours.

Sin has the power to destroy families. But Jesus saves you from your sins. And He saves your family from the power of sin. It took His death on the cross to do that. And He was very willing to go there for you and for your family.

This is why, even if you do not have a smile on your face, you have one in your heart. You have joy there no matter how much heartache you have there, no matter what troubles you are struggling with.

It is a painful world, a valley of sorrows says the Bible. But you have a Savior. And so you can celebrate at Christmas and always. Your sins are all forgiven. You and your family are loved by your gracious Lord. It doesn't get any better than that. Amen.