

## God With Us | God With The Fearful, Matthew 1:18-25

December 20, 2020 | Matthew McNutt

Just over 2700 years ago<sup>1</sup>, Isaiah gave an incredible prophecy:

*Isaiah 7:14 (NLT) The Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').*

This was a loaded statement, one that had meaning both for the ancient Israelites in their time, but a deeper, more significant truth that Matthew asserts, as we will see today, is fulfilled with the arrival of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we have been spending this Christmas season focusing on this name, "Immanuel." It means "God with us." Today's passage from Matthew will show us **God with the fearful**, which feels particularly relevant this year, doesn't it?

The other week I stumbled across a short film named "Numb", created by a ninth grader named Liv McNeil for a school project; she posted it to YouTube last June where it has been viewed well over a million times.

numb - a short film liv mcneil [length 3:22] <https://youtu.be/iSkbd6hRkXo>

### **[GOD WITH THE FEARFUL SLIDE]**

Wow. I felt this film. Short, but powerful. This has been a difficult time, and fear has been, and continues to be, a big part of it, doesn't it? Fear of covid. Fear of politics. Fear of isolation. Fear of groups. Fear for the economy. Fear for jobs. Fear for the future. Merry Christmas!

We're excited about Christmas – maybe there is a part of us that is excited for the distraction of Christmas – but lingering in the background is the fear that none of this is over yet.

In the incredible story of Christ's arrival, fear also makes an appearance.

*Matthew 1:18-25 (NLT) <sup>18</sup> This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.*

There is a lot here that is loaded in Jewish culture of 2000 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 2967.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 140.

First, let's talk about the context. Since scripture does not say otherwise, it's safe to assume that the ages of Mary and Joseph were the typical ages that people got married 2000 years ago, meaning that Mary was most likely 13-14 years old – the age of our eighth grade students, and Joseph was most likely 17 years old – the age of a high school junior.<sup>3</sup>

The engagement was not what we think of as an engagement; it was much more significant. Marriages were typically arranged by the parents, a contract was signed, and while the wedding itself did not occur until a year later, the engagement was so binding that they were legally considered married – the only way out would be either through a formal divorce, or through death, in which case the remaining person would be considered a widow or widower.<sup>4</sup> Mary and Joseph might not have really known each other or had much contact – even during the engagement stage.

All that to say, 17-year-old Joseph responded better than many of us would have responded when his 14 year old fiancé/wife – who he may not have even known that well – came to him and said she was pregnant, but it was all good because God did it: he decided to end that relationship because she must be a liar, cheater, and possibly missing a few marbles. In fact, if you look at this phrase, “**break the engagement**,” in your Bible, there is most likely a footnote that clarifies that in the Greek it actually says “**divorce her quietly**.”

Which is weird to say because many of us know the end of the story. We know she was telling the truth. We know that God actually did it. But we have the benefit of knowing the story as opposed to Joseph who woke up one day thinking he was going to do some carpentry and instead heard this.

And here's the thing; religious girls who get pregnant lie. It makes sense. Pregnancy can be scary and overwhelming normally. Much more so when you're an unmarried teenager. And far more so when you're in a culture that believes in the death penalty for such extra-marital entanglements. Later in Jesus' ministry, He will be confronted by the religious leaders with a demand to put a woman caught in adultery to death (John 7:53–8:11).

I remember when I was in college one of my friends was rushed to the hospital with horrible abdominal pain. When they let us in to visit her she was practically shaking with anger; apparently when she arrived they asked if she might be pregnant. She told them no, it wasn't possible because she was a virgin, but then they did a pregnancy test anyway – she was so offended they didn't believe her. I remember quietly saying, they know you're a student at a conservative Christian college – that there would be

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<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), Kindle location 2567.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985), Kindle location 608.

enormous cultural pressure for you to not admit it if you were sexually active. It's nothing against you, it's just that young people in religious communities are often too afraid to admit it, especially initially.

Back to Joseph. He had two options for ending this relationship; the first was what would have been expected of him<sup>5</sup>: a public trial for adultery, which at the very least would lead to public humiliation for Mary but could potentially lead to her being stoned. And I don't mean getting high, I mean people throwing rocks at her until she dies. This option would clear his honor and reputation – people were going to see that she was pregnant before the wedding date, if he didn't do something there would be questions about both of them.

The second option was a quiet divorce which only required two witnesses<sup>6</sup>; this would leave some questions about his reputation and honor – was he the father? It didn't provide for the same public moral justification, but it spared Mary the public humiliation and punishment. The book of Matthew has some of the most direct language against divorce in the Bible, yet in this moment not only is there no hint of criticism for Joseph, the decision to divorce is actually described as being a result of him being righteous. He was showing mercy at a cost to himself.

Which, to be clear, fear was threaded through all of this. He would have felt fear over his age, over his decision, over how his reputation and honor would be impacted, fear for his ability to get work, fear for future relationships, fear for what this would do to Mary. God's plan was not an easy one for any of those involved.

Frederick Dale Bruner, the scholar behind one of the more in-depth commentaries of the book of Matthew, asks the question, "Why should the Gospel begin on such a scandalous note?"<sup>7</sup> He suggests that the embarrassing pregnancy of Mary, combined with the humiliation of the cross – a punishment saved for criminals, points to Matthew's purpose in opening and concluding his gospel with these stories to show from the beginning that God's ways are not our ways, that God's righteousness is not our righteousness.<sup>8</sup>

***<sup>20</sup> As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."***

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<sup>5</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Kindle location 2591.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1987), Kindle location 975.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 982.

The angel confirmed what we know with his words, “do not be afraid” – for us it is easy to miss in all the holiday celebration. There is fear in this story.

There’s something else here that we’re going to come back to: this name Jesus is a Greek version of the Hebrew name Yeshua, which means “Yahweh saves” or “God saves.”<sup>9</sup>

***<sup>22</sup> All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”***

Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14, revealing the deeper meaning behind it. And giving us the theme for our entire series, “**God with us.**”

***<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.***

To be clear, Mary stands out the most in this young couple. She had far more to lose and the incredible faith she displayed as a fourteen-year-old is both inspiring and intimidating. We learn far more about her from scripture as her story weaves throughout the gospels. There is far less to see about Joseph; most likely because he passed away at some point before Christ’s public ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. It would not be unusual for someone in their thirties, Jesus, to have lost a parent by that point.

But what we do learn of Joseph is impressive. In a moment filled with fear, he chose compassion. And when he received a message from the Lord in a dream, he chose the far riskier choice – to believe Mary, to place his faith in God’s promise that this child was not of earthly origins, to raise a son that was not his own.

Michael J. Wilkins writes this; ***Joseph’s obedience to the message of the angel of the Lord overrules his own suspicions of Mary’s faithlessness as well as fear for the ruin of his own reputation and honor. Joseph’s emotional state at the time the angel appears to him must have been intensely conflicted. But this special revelation of God, at this paramount crossroad of history, gives him the guidance and stability that enables him to help carry out God’s program of salvation, even when he will become subject to ridicule and false accusations of moral failure.***<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 1066.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text ... to Contemporary Life.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 88.

At this crossroad, as Wilkins put it, Joseph chose God's wisdom over his own. Joseph's wisdom was solid; Joseph was making a righteous decision, but God's wisdom amplified and multiplied that righteousness.

All of this connects to our original statement; that Matthew will show us God with the fearful. God gave Joseph two reasons to have hope in his fear, both found in the names of Jesus.

1. Earlier, I mentioned that the name Jesus found in verse 21 that Joseph is commanded to name this child is a Greek version of the Hebrew name **Yeshua, which means "Yahweh saves" or "God saves."**

With His name alone, Jesus is a powerful source of comfort for those in times of fear. It is a constant reminder that He is here to save us, and that once He has saved us, nothing can take that away.

***Psalm 27:1 (NLT) The Lord is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid? The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble?***

There is nothing in all of creation that is more powerful than God. From the beginning of Genesis through the end of Revelation, the message is the same; that God will provide a way of salvation, a way for us to be restored to Him, and in this name Jesus, God was telling Joseph loud and clear that this was His plan, His salvation.

***Psalm 118:6-7 (NLT) <sup>6</sup> The Lord is for me, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me? <sup>7</sup> Yes, the Lord is for me; he will help me. I will look in triumph at those who hate me.***

I love what the psalmist writes here, "What can mere people do to me?" Every fear Joseph had, every fear we have, they come from things and people down here. What chance do they have against God? Yes, we still experience difficult times, Joseph was still going to face the whispers and judgement, he didn't know it yet, but he and Mary would flee to Egypt with their young baby to escape death, there was so much to come. AND YET. In the end, God triumphs. In the end, we win. When the reward is great, the difficulty becomes worth it, doesn't it? "***The Lord is for me, so I will have no fear.***"

**JESUS MEANS GOD SAVES.** We have strength in our fear literally in the name of Jesus. God saves. Our salvation is certain.

2. **The second reason God gave Joseph to have hope in his fear? The name Immanuel, which means GOD WITH US.**

Why was Joseph able to take the bolder, more difficult choice? Because God was with him. God's presence enabled him to go from making what was a noble decision

in the world's eyes, to a far greater decision – one with eternal weight. Joseph could have left Mary and been viewed as a righteous man, lived a normal life, and been forgotten. Instead, like Abraham, Rahab, Moses, and Ruth, he did something far more dangerous because God was with him, and we have spent thousands of years looking to each of them as examples.

*Psalm 23:4 (NLT) Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.*

“You are close beside me.” God is with us in our fear, in our darkest valleys.

*Isaiah 41:10 (NLT) Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.*

“I am with you.” Is there a greater promise? In each of these passages, God's presence does not exempt us from hard times, but it does change them, doesn't it? Just like when you were a child, and that terrifying basement was suddenly fine with the presence of your parent, our difficult times become things no longer feared when we recognize that God is with us. **Romans 8:38-39** promises in no uncertain terms that nothing can come between us and God.

Where are you this season? Is fear overwhelming you? Are the challenges of this year wearing you down? Do not look to Christmas as just a distraction from difficulties that will bring you back down when the tree has been put away; use this time to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas: **God with us**. In the same way that Jesus was physically with Mary and Joseph 2000 years ago, we now have God with us today. Read these passages, remember God's promises, find hope in His reassurances. Connect with other believers and encourage one another in our hope and confidence in God with us.