

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“THE BIRTH OF PEACE”**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

- **“For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** (Is. 9:6)
- Christ Jesus {Eph 2:17} **“came and preached peace”** with God, peace with others, and peace in one’s own heart.
- He said to his first disciples, and by extension to us, {Jn 14:27} **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”** These are not empty words. Many of us have received the Lord’s gift of peace. We are experiencing it firsthand.
  - Yet the Messiah’s arrival was jarringly un-peaceful, as was his exit from the public eye. Turmoil and conflict erupted at his birth, and boiled up again during his ministry.
    - ☞ The politicians reacted with violence.
  - When Herod the Great heard that a new {Mt 2:6} **“ruler”** and **“shepherd of...Israel”** had been born {Mt 2:16} he ordered the slaughter of every boy **“in Bethlehem and its vicinity...two years old and under.”**
    - Thirty-three years later the Roman governor of Judea signed off on Christ’s crucifixion. He knew Jesus was innocent but he sent him to the cross anyway, in order to protect his power.
      - ☞ The religious authorities reacted with outrage.

If they knew Mary was pregnant while she was betrothed to Joseph, they might have suggested that he execute her by stoning. At the very least, they counseled him to ruin her with a public divorce on the grounds of adultery.

And when Jesus was an adult, all but a few religious leaders vehemently rejected him. They grumbled against him, spread rumors about him, directly opposed him, and plotted to have him killed.

☞ Many of the public reacted with rejection.

When Jesus was born most people who knew Mary and Joseph assumed he was a child of sin. Surely some were harsh, which helps to explain why the couple did not immediately return to Nazareth.

Years later, the people of Nazareth attempted to lynch Jesus. Many of his “fans” turned on him when they began to understand the demands of discipleship. And the chief priests did not have to work very hard to stir up the crowd to shout, {Mk 15:13} **“Crucify him!”**

Christ Jesus *is* the **“Prince of Peace”**. Only through him we can be truly reconciled to God, our enemies, and even ourselves.

Nevertheless, his advent was not a peaceful event. To the contrary, it triggered intense discord and even bloodshed. Aside from the Virgin Mary, no one knew this better than Joseph.

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 1:18: **“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”**

Three hugely relevant facts jump out at us here.

① Mary is betrothed to Joseph. The first century Jewish marriage process has three steps. Step 1 is engagement. This is set up by the parents or a match-maker, often when the boy and girl are small children.

Step 2 is the betrothal. It begins with a ceremony to confirm the engagement. At that event the girl has every right to break the engagement without penalty; but if she accepts the betrothal it is absolutely binding on her.

Betrothal lasts one year. It is legally equivalent to marriage, except that physical intimacy is strictly forbidden and the couple lives in separate homes. It can be broken only if the man files for divorce.

In Matthew 1 Mary is betrothed to Joseph. He is her husband, she is his wife.

Step 3 is full marriage itself, which begins with a wedding at the end of the betrothal year.

② Mary gets pregnant, even though she and Joseph have not yet been intimate.

The child in Mary's womb is the Prince of Peace. Yet her pregnancy shatters the peace.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Mary is your wife, but the two of you have never been intimate. Now she tells you that she is "**with child**"?!

You are unaware of the technical details of reproduction – but you are not stupid. You have observed local farmers breeding their livestock. You have been taught the basic facts of life. You know full well that pregnancy occurs only when a female lies with a male.

You can imagine only two scenarios that would explain her condition: Mary is the pitiable victim of a

heinous assault, or she is the vile perpetrator of a sin that desecrates your deepest convictions and violates your sacred trust. Either way, when you hear the words "**with child**" you are overcome with shock, confusion, disappointment, humiliation, and outrage. Your internal peace is smashed, your relational peace with Mary is blown apart, and your peace with God takes a huge blow (You are compelled to ask, "Why are you letting this happen to me?").

③ Mary gets pregnant through the Holy Spirit. It has to happen this way, not because human reproduction is inherently sinful – it is not – but because the Prince of Peace must be both God and human to accomplish his mission. Mary's motherhood makes Jesus fully human. God's fatherhood makes him fully divine.

I am speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. You are receiving my words calmly. Not so with Mary and Joseph! God is the Father? Your baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit?

Many moderns envision ancient people as laughably gullible simpletons who called every strange occurrence a miracle. They assume that if Mary said it was a miracle everybody would swallow her fable hook, line, and sinker.

What rubbish! Miraculous conceptions do happen frequently in the pagan myths. But by the first century only a tiny percentage of pagans actually believe them. Besides Joseph and Mary are Jews, and the handful of miraculous conceptions recorded in

the Hebrew Scriptures are nothing like the ones in the pagan myths.

So when Mary says she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, Joseph can imagine only two possibilities: Mary is telling a brazen lie, or she is severely deluded.

Either way, when he hears the words **“through the Holy Spirit”** he is overcome with disbelief, disgust, dismay, mortification, and alarm. The fragments of his inner peace are further shattered, what might remain of his peace with Mary is blown away, and his peace with God is hanging by a thread.

For Joseph, the conception of the Prince of Peace is, at first, a maelstrom of turmoil and conflict.

○ The Law {Lev 20:10} mandates that **“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife... both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”** A victim of rape must be protected and her assailant executed, but if the encounter is consensual they shall both be stoned to death – {Dt 22:23-24} **“the girl because she did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife.”**

■ It is Joseph’s legal right – some would say his *moral obligation* – to have her stoned to death. But that is not his heart toward her. Matthew 1:19: **“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”**

Joseph’s intent, despite the storm raging within, is to honor God by upholding the truth and maintaining his purity, and to protect Mary. He regrets that a divorce *will* cause Mary grief – but she will be alive. And unlike a

“loud” divorce, in which a man makes a public spectacle of his wife and drags her name through the mud, a “quiet” one will help to preserve Mary’s dignity and open up some future opportunities for her.

☆ Notice that Joseph settles on a course of action that will maximize the possibility of peace with God, peace with others, and peace with the self – not only for himself, but also for Mary. What a good man!

■ His commitment to peace-making makes it easier to obey when Sovereign God commands him to do something even more remarkable. Matthew 1:20-21 and 24-25:

**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. 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.”**

**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**

The people interpret Joseph’s actions as an admission of guilt. Obedience exposes him to scorn and derision. In all likelihood, his shop loses money as his customers take their business elsewhere.

But surely God blesses Joseph with a {Php 4:7} “**peace...which transcends all understanding**” that does not depend on the success of his shop or what other people think and say about him. Better yet, he gives Joseph the vital role of protecting, nurturing, and training the Messiah. The Almighty works through Joseph to bring real peace to the world.

Joseph is caught in a highly conflicted situation, yet he receives God’s peace and becomes an instrument of God’s peace.

Of course, our peace is not in that remarkable man Joseph; it is in Jesus. May we receive the peace that only he can give, even in the turmoil and conflict that boil around us! And may he use us to bring genuine peace to our neighbors and the world: peace with God, peace with others (including our enemies), and peace within ourselves.