



# Joseph Trusts God

## *Faith in God's Promises*

### About the Story

This week, we begin the New Testament. We begin in the Gospels, which tell the good news of Jesus. This year in the Narrative Lectionary, our Gospel book of focus is the Book of Matthew. Matthew's Gospel begins with Jesus' genealogy and a bold statement about Jesus' identity, today's lesson focuses on the circumstances leading up to Jesus' birth.

### The Point:

**God's plans may surprise us.** Perhaps we are like Joseph, only able to see part of the picture. But, just like Joseph, we can trust in God's promise, even when God works in unexpected ways.

Most of us are probably very familiar with the Christmas story. Perhaps we have heard it year after year since we were children. Many churches even have a Christmas pageant, where the Sunday School classes put on an adaptation of the story. Even if we are new to the story, we probably can name some of the major details: the angel appearing to Mary, the angels appearing to the shepherds, Jesus being born in a manger in Bethlehem, and the story of the wise men bringing their gifts. The story has been told so many times, though, that the details often get mixed up.

In Matthew's version of the story, it is Joseph, not Mary, who is visited by the angel in a dream. In Luke's version of the story, we hear about Jesus being born in the manger and the shepherds visiting him. Matthew's version skips over that part, picking up instead with the wise men. Over the next few weeks, pay attention to Matthew's version of the beginning of Jesus' story, noting the places where the story diverges or leaves out the parts we are probably familiar with, beginning with today's story.

In today's story, Joseph was engaged to Mary. Joseph discovered that she was pregnant and was about to break off their engagement, planning to do so secretly to protect Mary from public shame. Before he was able to act on his plan, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit and the child will save his people from their sins. Joseph woke up and took Mary as his wife. Jesus was born soon after.

At the center of this story is God's promise of a Savior. Perhaps we are like Joseph, only able to see part of the picture. But, also like Joseph, we can trust in God's promise, even when God works in unexpected ways.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to declare new things in the form of a promised servant. In today's lesson, we see that promise come into fruition as the angel tells Joseph of a new servant who will be "God with us." Next week, the story backs up to the beginning of Matthew, as we encounter the long line of Jesus' ancestors, putting Jesus into the wider context of God's salvation story that began in the Old Testament and continues to today.

Opening Prayer

God of love, you sent your Son into this world, fulfilling your promise of hope. Help us to share that hope and joy of your promise with others. We pray all of this in the one whose name is a promise, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

Into the Story

Take this time together as a group to help center yourselves in the midst of this often hectic season. Choose someone to lead the group through the following centering activity. Important: during this activity, be aware of your surroundings. Additionally, it is okay to adapt this activity to your own personal comfort and ability level.

Have everyone who is able stand up. Stretch your arms up to the ceiling, breathing in as you do, then slowly bring them down to your side, breathing out. Repeat this three times. Then, have the participants close their eyes. This time, breath in deeply counting to ten, focusing on your breath, and try to fill your lung with as much air as possible. Count to three, then exhale slowly, counting to ten. Repeat this three times. When you are finished, return to your seats. Take a moment to check-in: how did the centering exercise feel?

Learning the Story

*Joseph discovers that his soon-to-be wife, Mary, is pregnant and plans to quietly end their relationship. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that he should not dismiss Mary, as her child is the Messiah and is to be named Jesus.*

**Read Matthew 1:18-25 – Joseph's Dream**

- ❓ How would you react if you were in Joseph's situation? How would you react if you were in Mary's situation?
- ❓ If Mary's child is to be named Jesus (which means "God saves"), why do you think the angel says that he shall be named Emmanuel (which means "God is with us")?

Bible Connections

- ✚ Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 in today's passage.
- ✚ Deuteronomy 22:23-27 provides some backstory as to what was at stake if Mary was found to be unfaithful, which might be why Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly.
- ✚ Luke 2:1-20 tells Luke's version of the birth of Jesus.

- ❓ As stated in the introduction, Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth is different from Luke’s. Why do you think the two stories are so different?
- ❓ Do you think the two stories contradict each other or are they more complimentary? What do you think is the main point that Matthew is trying to get across through his version?
- ❓ Why do you think Luke’s version, and not Matthew’s, is the one usually told at Christmas?

### Living the Story: Prayer

Take a piece of construction paper and cut it into your desired shape for your ornament (some ideas for shapes: a circle, a star, a snowflake). Punch a hole in the top. Then, write a prayer for the new year on your ornament—it could be a prayer for good health, for time spent with family and friends, a prayer for those in need, etc. Feel free to decorate the ornament. Tie the ribbon or put the wire hook through the hole. Now, you have a new ornament to hang on your tree, along with a special prayer. If you have time, feel free to make a second ornament to gift to a friend or family member.

### Supplies

- ✚ Multicolored construction paper or card stock
- ✚ Scissors
- ✚ Markers
- ✚ Hole punch
- ✚ Wire hook or ribbon

### Closing Prayer

Go around the group and share your prayer ornaments. Pray the prayers together, sharing in each other’s prayers and wishes for the New Year.

### Bible Nuts & Bolts: The Messiah

“Messiah” is a Hebrew word for “anointed,” usually understood to be one chosen by God for a specific task. For instance, kings in David’s line were anointed as a symbol of being chosen by God to be the ruler of Israel. There are several different applications of the term “messiah” in the Old Testament:

1. A kingly figure, specifically, someone from David’s line who was meant to rule Israel.
2. A prophet or priestly figure, promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15.
3. The Persian King Cyrus the Great, who was labeled the messiah in Isaiah 45:1 because he was said to be anointed by God to return the Israelites to their homeland and end the Babylonian exile.
4. An eschatological figure (someone appearing at the end times) who would restore the line of David (Daniel 9:25).

Jesus had elements of all four applications, as Jesus was a descendent of David (as Matthew shows in next week’s reading) who showed prophetic powers and brought salvation to all people.

At Home

- ✚ Compare this passage to the angel's appearance to Mary in Luke 1:26-38. What are the similarities and differences?
- ✚ Christmas is right around the corner! What traditions does your household have to celebrate? Perhaps start a new tradition this year to help serve those in need. Some ideas: write Christmas cards for service members, donate toys to families in need, volunteer to visit your church's homebound members during the holiday season, or go Christmas caroling at a nursing facility.
- ✚ Do not forget about to pray your Christmas ornament prayers!

Daily Readings (Week 1)**Sunday – Read Matthew 1:18-25**

An angel appears to Joseph, telling him that Mary will give birth to Jesus, God's promised Messiah. Make a plan to include time for prayer and devotion throughout this busy, holiday week.

**Monday – Read Isaiah 7:10-17**

Isaiah reassures King Ahaz, telling him of the promise of Emmanuel. Sing your favorite Christmas hymns or carols (or listen to a recording), and think of the promise contained in the name "Emmanuel."

**Tuesday – Read Jeremiah 33:14-18**

God promises a righteous branch. Close your eyes, take deep breaths, and picture what the world would look like if justice and righteousness were everywhere.

**Wednesday – Read Luke 1:5-25**

The birth of John the Baptist is foretold. Whenever you encounter water today, whether it is in the shower or while doing dishes, take a moment to remember your baptism and the promise it contains. If you have not been baptized, reflect on the promise of baptism and what it will mean.

**Thursday – Read Luke 1:26-38**

An angel appears to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to the Messiah. How would you react if you were in Mary's situation? Journal your thoughts.

**Friday – Read Luke 1:39-56**

Mary sings a song of praise. Read Mary's song as a prayer. Feel free to add your own petitions to the end, if you wish.

**Saturday – Read Isaiah 9:2-7**

Isaiah speaks of a child born for us who will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. What other names is Jesus referred to in the Bible? Write down some of your favorite and put it in a prominent place to remind you of God's promise fulfilled in Jesus.

## Daily Readings (Week 2)

*As there is no Discussion Guide provided for the week beginning on Christmas Day, the Daily Readings for that week are included here for your use.*

### **Sunday – Read Luke 2:1-20**

Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Read the Christmas story out loud as part of your personal or household's Christmas celebrations.

### **Monday – Read Genesis 1:1–2:3**

God creates the world. Take a look outside and thank God for the different things you see.

### **Tuesday – Read John 1:1-18**

The Word was sent to dwell among us. Light a candle and sit in silence. Which words or phrases of this passage stick out for you?

### **Wednesday – Read John 1:19-28**

John the Baptist comes. If someone were to ask you, “Who are you?” what would you tell them beyond your name?

### **Thursday – Read John 1:29-34**

John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God. If you were asked to describe Jesus in two or three sentences, what would you say?

### **Friday – Read John 1:35-42**

The first disciples. What do you think Jesus wanted the disciples to “come and see”?

### **Saturday – Read John 1:43-51**

Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael. Nathanael had a bad opinion of people from Nazareth. Who might you have a bad opinion of, and how might you go about seeing Jesus in them?