

Christmas Pears Pairs

This morning we'll continue thinking about the *Spirit of Christmas*. And, we'll do it by considering several sets of Christmas pairs—not a pair of Christmas mittens, not a partridge in a pear tree, not even Christmas pear jelly with jalapeños. These Christmas pairs all derive from Mary and Joseph because, in so many ways, they might be considered the perfect Christmas pair. It just seems like they were made for each other, and I am sure God planned it that way. And we don't want to forget the angels—because the angels who came down to earth delivering their Christmas messages, they delivered them in holy pairs as well. Let's take up Joseph first and then Mary, and finally the angels who spoke to them. And with Mary and Joseph, I want you to notice the pair of characteristics that were a common part of their personalities, and notice the pair of messengers who bore news that would test their common strengths.

We are introduced to Joseph in Matthew's Gospel, which tells us: ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: ²³ "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.'" ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 NLT2)

Although we are not given a lot of information about Joseph in the Bible, we have enough here to tell us some important things about him. The most important thing is that Joseph is said to have been a "good" man. The Greek word for "good" is *dikaios*, and this word has a bit more meaning to it than we can derive from the English word "good." It means that Joseph was a *righteous* man. In other words, he was *fair* and *just* in dealing with people. Here, the word for "good", as applied to Joseph, most likely has implications of *compassion* mixed with the demands of justice. And that is what is so remarkable about Joseph. He was not only a good, fair and compassionate person when things were going smoothly. He was that way even when life seemed anything but good and fair toward him. It's

hard for those in our society to even imagine the terrible circumstances that faced Joseph. Today, it seems that nobody even raises an eyebrow when an unmarried woman comes up pregnant—whether they are engaged or not. But, that wasn't the case in Joseph's day.

Mary coming up pregnant before she and Joseph actually started their life together as husband and wife—well, that was outrageous. I am sure that for a good while, Joseph was the butt of many jokes there in the little village of Nazareth. Mary's unwed pregnant state was a great embarrassment to Joseph that demanded that justice be meted out to the offending woman who was carrying a baby out of wedlock. The Law of Moses was clear and so was the justice that it demanded. Deuteronomy 22 put it this way: ²³ "Suppose a man meets a young woman, a virgin who is engaged to be married, and he has sexual intercourse with her [which was exactly the position that Mary appeared to be in from Joseph's perspective]. If this happens within a town [like Nazareth], ²⁴ you must take both of them to the gates of that town and stone them to death." Deuteronomy 22:23-24 (NLT2) The only other option that Joseph had was to quietly settle matters by giving her a bill of divorce.¹ And, rather than seeing Mary stoned to death in great shame, he decided to go with the latter option and quietly divorce her—even though it would cost him his honor and would make him the laughing stock of his community.

But, then the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. And, the angel explained that he should stick with Mary and complete the marriage ceremony and take her as his full-fledged wife—despite what the people might think or say about him. Now the course of conduct that the angel was suggesting would appear absolutely outrageous to the members of Joseph's community. If Joseph followed what the angel said to do, the world would roll its eyes and look upon him with disgust and contempt. Yet, Joseph swallowed his pride for the sake of humanity—because he believed what God told him through this angel: This child Mary was carrying, the one who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, He would *"save his people from their sins."* And if this Child would do that, then Joseph was on board with God's plan no matter how many jokes or stares of contempt were cast in his direction. That's the kind of guy Joseph was.

And, what about Mary? What does God's Word tell us about her? Well, it tells us that a pair of angels were involved up to this point in the Christmas Story—the one who visited Joseph in a dream, and now a second one who paid Mary a very direct visit. It was the angel named Gabriel—the one who was so great that he stood in the very presence of God Himself. Luke's Gospel describes this visit that Gabriel had with Mary. And from this angelic visit, we find out quite a bit about the personality traits that Mary possessed. Luke states as follows: ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be

married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” ²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰ “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” ³⁴ Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” ³⁵ The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she’s now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God.” ³⁸ Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her. Luke 1:26-38 (NLT2)

So, what can we conclude about Mary from all of this? What kind of woman was she? Well, she could hardly be considered a woman at all by today’s standards. Most theologians reckon that Mary was about 12 to 14 years old when she was carrying the Baby Jesus. But, her spiritual maturity and faith was that of a much older person—because Mary knew exactly what Joseph knew as far as the punishment involved for an unwed, pregnant, Jewish mother. She also realized exactly what Joseph must be thinking—that she had cheated on him. And Mary realized that he would be compelled to either have her subjected to a public trial of shame that could end up in her being put to death, or he’d simply divorce her. Either way, she would be in a very dire situation—either dead from the crushing blows of stones hurled her way, or she’d be an outcast woman left with meager means to take care of herself and a little baby all on her own.

But, despite all of this, notice that Mary’s response to the news that she was to become pregnant was very different from Zachariah’s, when he was told by another angel that his aged wife, Elizabeth, would be giving birth to the baby, John the Baptist. Zachariah doubted—i.e. he wasn’t buying any of what the angel told him unless the angel explained all of this in such a way that he could be **sure** what God promised would, indeed, take place.² But, God doesn’t operate in that fashion. He doesn’t set things up so that you know for sure that it is 100% guaranteed. Why?—because such certainty leaves no room for faith. Such certainty eliminates the atmosphere in which true faith is tested—and faith can only be tested when the outcome, from our limited perspective, may appear uncertain and because of that uncertainty, great risks are at stake. Zachariah’s initial response was to demand certainty, but all he received was the absolute certainty that he would not be able to speak again until

he showed a little faith. For as we saw last week, Gabriel silenced him and took away his speech until Elizabeth gave birth to her child.

And while Mary may have wondered how God would make all this come about, since she was a virgin, she never expressed a single doubt. And when Gabriel explains that she will conceive through the Holy Spirit, her only response was to say that she was there to serve the Lord—in whatever capacity He demanded. And if being a pregnant virgin was what God planned, then as far as Mary was concerned, that was the way that it was going to be. The people of the village might want to stone her, and maybe even Joseph would abandon her—but come what may she had faith in God’s plan and was just happy to be a part of it.

And when we view Joseph and Mary in the light of their trust in the promises of God, we can see that it is true—they were, indeed, a match made in Heaven—a *pair* that God had obviously made for each other. And notice this: In addition to their commonly held faith in God, they were bonded together by a unique quality—that quality called *compassion*. The justice called for under the Jewish legal traditions regarding divorce were not enough to trump Joseph’s compassion. He chose compassion and trusted in God’s direction as announced by the angel. And so Joseph stuck with Mary. And, Mary, in turn, stuck with God’s plan despite all the dire risks that that plan entailed. And while Joseph’s compassion was directed toward Mary, Mary’s own compassion was directed on a much wider, a much grander scale. For her compassion inured to the benefit of all humanity in bearing birth to Immanuel—the Christ child—and truly bringing God into this world to be with us.

All of which brings us to yet another set of pairs that we can see in Mary and Joseph. They both reflect the most holy pair of commandments—a pair of commandments that offer the most precious commodity that exists in this world. It is a commodity that is becoming harder and harder to find these days. It is the commodity known as *love*. And the pair that Mary and Joseph so selflessly reflect in their trust and obedience to God is the *perfect pairing* of their love for God, and their love toward our fellow man. This baby that Mary would give birth to would one day grow up and tell us *a pair of the most important applications of love*. Jesus said: ³⁷ “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40 (NLT2) Mary’s and Joseph’s actions demonstrated this holy pair of commandments that Jesus would speak of. They were willing to face all the risks—those *dangerous* risks—that came with being faithful to God’s messages regarding the birth of Jesus. And why did they take those risks?—because of love, or more specifically, because of their love for God.

They showed that they loved Him with all of their heart, soul and mind by obeying God and following His plan for their lives. If you really want to show that you love God, then obey Him. If you really want to have the *Christmas Spirit* this Holiday Season, then obey God—it's that simple. Jesus said: ¹⁵ "If you love me, obey my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. ¹⁷ He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth." John 14:15-17a (NLT2) Remember last week when we could see in God's Word that the *Spirit of Christmas* is the *Holy Spirit*. If you want to truly have the *Christmas Spirit*—then obey God's commandments because that are specifically attuned to what God has planned for your life. And that plan that God has especially for you is to give you true life in order that you can enjoy life more abundantly.³

And so now, we come to the final Christmas pair that is provided by the angels. Notice that the angels' first message is always, "***Fear not!***" or "***Don't be afraid!***" That was the initial message to Zechariah, and to both Joseph and to Mary. It would be the same message to the shepherds tending to their flock by night. And then the Angels would follow that message up with the second part of the pair—they would then deliver some message of Good News and glad tidings from God. That is a ***true Christmas pair: "Don't be afraid, God has Good News for you!"*** It's a pair of wonderful Christmas messages that resonate throughout the year—and throughout the lives of those in Christ.

And that very same wonderful news is still the message of the Christmas Story today. As it turns out, it is probably expressed best, not in Luke's Gospel or in Matthew's, but in the Gospel of John. John tells us that the reason that we are to "***fear not***" is because God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son [in the form of a little baby who was laid in a wooden cattle trough] that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life⁴—because that Son would one day grow up and be nailed to wooden cross to die for you and me. That ***is*** the message of Christmas!

It's a message that needs to be spread. And during Christmas, it is odd to hear this, but this very message is being spread to the North Pole. Well, not quite the North Pole, but one of the next things to it. In the December issue of *Christianity Today*, there's an article about the country of Iceland, with a subtitle reading: "*Icelandic ministry brings the Gospel to the world's most avid—and secular—readers.*" The article states: "Some form of Christianity has been practiced in Iceland for as long as humans have lived there, but the land of fire and ice has turned increasingly skeptical and secular." The article goes on to explain that, today in Iceland, less than 10% of the people attend church regularly and over half the population denies having any religious affiliation at all. It has gotten so bad that there are very few children's books available in Iceland to help tell the Christmas Story or even introduce younger readers to Jesus. The magazine article is all about a new ministry called the *Iceland Project*. The goal of this

Project is to get copies of a colorful illustrated children's book entitled, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, circulated to as many Icelanders as possible before Christmas.⁵

When I read this, I couldn't help but think of the Christmas back-packs that so many of you stuffed with Bibles and Christian books for delivery to the children in Appalachia who may well be afraid—afraid of poverty and dark despair, who certainly need to hear the Good News that they need **not fear**, for Jesus is their Savior too. This is the Christmas message that God calls us to proclaim worldwide. What a blessing it will be for those children in Appalachia, as well those as in Iceland, to begin to hear about Jesus! What a wonderful Christmas morning is in store for those who receive the gift of Christ!

Speaking of Christmas morning—it will be here before you know it. So, when you stagger out sleepy-eyed to look under the tree, maybe you will see that pair of mittens awaiting you, or a pair of socks, or a pair of ear-buds for your MP3 player, or maybe even a pair of pears for your fruit basket. But, whatever pair it may be, remember the series of pairs that we can see here in God's Word—those pairs that assure us that in Christ, **we need never fear**—that God has good news for us—that all we need to do is to trust and obey His will. And if you will just do that, then the Holy Spirit will take over your life and the **Spirit of Christmas** will abide in you, not only during this special Season, but forever more.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ Deuteronomy 24:1 (NLT2) "Suppose a man marries a woman but she does not please him. Having discovered something wrong with her, he writes her a letter of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house." See: Larry Chouinard, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Matthew*, ed. Jack Cottrell, Ph.D. and Tony Ash, Ph.D., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 47.

² Luke 1:18 (NLT2) Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

³ John 10:10b (NKJV) [Jesus said:] "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

⁴ John 3:16 (NKJV) For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

⁵ Kate Shellnutt, *People of the Book*, Christianity Today, December 2018, Vol. 62, No. 10, pp. 23-24.