

## **“Announce! The Power of Redemption”**

*Reading: Matthew 1:18-25*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

It's really a shame that we have so little information about Joseph. The assumption of some people is that Joseph may have died before Jesus reached adulthood, and that's why he disappears from the story after Jesus' childhood. In many ways he must have been a remarkable person. Modern people want the whole story; we want to know what he was like and how he grew up and what he was thinking as he experienced all of these events, but ancient audiences didn't usually think like that. To ancient people, all you needed to know about a person was where they were from, what group they fit into, and then you knew everything you needed to know. If you're a Roman merchant, you're pretty much like every other Roman merchant. If you're a Jewish laborer from Galilee, you're pretty much like every other Jewish laborer from Galilee.

So we can imagine a lot about Joseph and stand a good chance of being accurate. He was a working man who probably cared about working man sorts of things. I'm guessing that working men haven't really changed that much in two thousand years; I imagine he was not particularly educated but very practical, not full of book learning but full of common sense and skill for his life's work. I picture him as being not a very grand person, but a very real one. I think of my grandfathers, who grew up in the Depression and the war: with the right tool they could make things work, and if they didn't have the right tool, they'd figure it out anyway.

And yet as honorable as all of those good, solid characteristics are, we know that there must have been even more to Joseph. It takes a special type of person to choose to raise a child that you know is not your own. Our human biology is hard-wired to take care of our own biological offspring, but to pour all your resources and energy and emotion into someone else's child takes a unique gift of love. Our culture especially knows that mixed families can get messy in ways that “traditional” families don't, and the willingness to take on that mess to show love and support to someone else's child means that you have to be deep enough and mature enough to see that that child is worth the investment regardless of their biology. Joseph apparently had that maturity. Even though he may not have lived to raise Jesus to adulthood, Joseph certainly had an impact on him: Jesus of course was a reflection of His heavenly Father, but like any child, I'm sure He also reflected bits of the father who raised Him, too.

But on top of all of that, there's the element that really sets Joseph apart. Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph was “faithful to the law,” which means that he was a good, committed, religious Jew who knew and followed the rules. You can follow God's rules without really loving God, though, and this is where Joseph is different. He must have been a man who genuinely trusted God and wanted to be faithful to Him. Because Joseph wasn't just choosing to adopt someone else's kid. Joseph and Mary were engaged, and engagement in that culture was a bigger deal than it is today. Obviously breaking off an engagement is not something anyone takes lightly today, but in that culture, when you were betrothed, you were basically married in the eyes of the law. The marriage hadn't been consummated yet and you weren't living together, but you were still legally bound to one another. So if Mary is pregnant and Joseph's not the father, it's pretty clear that she hasn't been faithful to him, which means she has committed adultery, and the legal punishment for adultery could be death by stoning.

Joseph was faced with a major scandal, or at least a major scandal relatively speaking. Nazareth was a small town, and you probably know how scandals travel in a small town. There are a lot of great things about a small, tightly-knit community, but one of the drawbacks is that everything gets magnified under the microscope of small-town life. Joseph's wife appears to have committed a capital crime. She appears to have been unfaithful to her husband, and unfaithfulness was extremely serious in that culture. It is to Joseph's credit that even though he would have been well within his rights to expose Mary to public shame and punishment, Joseph decided instead to minimize the risk to Mary by simply divorcing her. That would still bring a great deal of shame with it, but maybe she could at least escape punishment that way. That's a pretty significant display of Joseph's maturity.

But then we see a significant display of his faith in God. I'm sorry, but if I were in Joseph's shoes it would take more than a dream to convince me of Mary's innocence. Even a dream about angels probably wouldn't do it for me; I really think I'd need the angel actually standing in front of me and poking me to prove that I'm not dreaming. But Joseph was enough in tune with God that he was able to recognize a genuine message from God when he saw it. What's more, this man who was placed smack in the middle of God's redemption of the world must have realized something very important about the angel's announcement to him: Joseph heard not just the command to accept Mary as his wife, but also the promise that the child in her womb would save His people from their sins. It's the announcement that this Messiah is bringing a salvation from sin that is greater than the scandal of sin.

We've been looking long and hard at these announcements from the angels during this season of Advent. Announcements are not always exciting things, but they point us to something important. Announcements are not the action, but they tell us about the action. Hear the announcement and do something as a result: it's meant to be responded to. The angel told Zechariah about the birth of John the Baptist with a message that repentance is possible and you can return home. The angel told Mary that Jesus would bring an eternal kingdom, and therefore our focus is shifted to eternal things. And to Joseph, the angel is saying that this child Jesus, who would be accused of being born as a result of sinful unfaithfulness, this child whose birth could be scandalous, this child has the mission of saving people from their sins. The salvation He brings will be greater than the scandal of His birth.

These days I'm sure there are consultants who have made a career out of helping people and candidates and companies recover from scandal. Scandal is expected. You run for office, you expect people to dig up dirt about you. You go into business and are successful, someone will eventually find a reason to sue you. So there's a process a politician or a company will go through when a scandal breaks. They figure out immediately whether the scandal has legs, or whether it can be ignored. We expect them to be penitent but not weak. They make just enough of an apology without actually admitting wrong. Maybe they'll pay a little fine, and then the news moves on to something else. Scandals are enough of a part of our world these days that we expect them and almost find them entertaining — until they hit too close to home. When the shame of sin hits you or your family head-on, the weight can seem too much to bear. But the angel announces that the salvation of this Christ child is greater than the scandal of sin.

Joseph heard the announcement, and he trusted God, and we are the beneficiaries of his faithful decision. We need to hear the announcement, too. We need to be constantly reminded that

Jesus came to save people from their sins. The scandal of sin is not too big for Him to handle. It is clearly true that sin is a monstrous thing. It destroys lives, it demolishes families, it scars generation after generation. It is not something to be winked at or toyed with. But if we're not careful, we get so appalled by the monstrosity of sin that we don't want to get close enough to sinners to tell them that there is a salvation from sin greater than their scandal. The devil is quite capable of turning our hatred toward sin into a self-righteous distaste for sinners. We can get so caught up in their scandal that we don't take salvation seriously for them. We hate the sin so much that we let it stain our love for the sinner. And sometimes we even go so far as to stray into legalism, where we're so worried about the scandal of sin that we start inventing sins to avoid.

But the angel's announcement is to be our announcement as well. Get over the scandal of sin so that you can preach the message of salvation. Our good news is *good*. Jesus Christ really is strong enough to break the power of sin. He really can set the addict free, restore broken relationships, heal our hurts, and even transform the self-righteous into missionaries of hope. I admit, it's easy to get jaded. We've all seen shams and charlatans, and we all know people who started out being fired up for God but then crashed and burned. It seems like evil is winning the day, and we can begin to worry whether redemption really is greater than scandal. How can we have a real hope in redemption when children are gunned down in our schools? How can the promise of the birth of this Messiah overcome darkness like that? When evil seems so random, so hate-filled, so insane, where is the hope of redemption?

The message of Advent is not just that we need to prepare for Christmas, it's also that we need to prepare for the return of the one who came at Christmas. The story is not over. The redemption of the world is not yet complete. The Christmas child is able to redeem us even from the jaws of death, but we are awaiting the completion of that redemption. While we live in this awkward time of waiting between His arrival and His return, we need to continue the announcement of the angel: the salvation Jesus brings is greater than the scandal of sin. The love He calls us to, the sacrifice, the generosity, the forgiveness, the reconciliation, the faithfulness and devotion to God, these are greater than the scandal of sin.

Advent is a time of waiting, but it's also a time of preparation: live a life that shows that the redemption Jesus brings is greater than the scandal of sin. Hear the announcement and do it.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)