

## **December 24, 2023–Advent 2023: Characters of Christmas**

### **Joseph**

#### **Matthew 1:18-25**

#### **See also Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23**

1. Have you ever known someone whose plans for marriage and family life were drastically changed? How did this person respond?
2. The Bible does not speak much about Joseph, the father of Jesus, apart from the beginning of Matthew. But he is described as a “righteous” man. What similarities does Joseph share with Mary? (Mary’s story is found in Luke’s opening chapters.)
3. Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus. Scholars often note the placement of three female figures in this genealogy: Tamar (1:3), Ruth (1:5), and Bathsheba (1:6). All three women had unconventional intimate relationships. Matthew then turns to the story of Joseph and Mary, with Mary’s unusual pregnancy. What connections do you think the author is trying to make between the people in the genealogy and the coming of Jesus?
4. Joseph receives messages from God in his dreams. Are there practices that have helped you listen for God in your life? Do you find it difficult to listen to God?

5. The angel tells Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...” (1:20). Why would Joseph need to be told *not to* be afraid?
  
6. After Jesus is born, Joseph has to take drastic measures to ensure the safety of Mary and Jesus by fleeing with them to Egypt (see 2:13-15). For a while they are political refugees as they hide from the murderous intentions of Herod. Have you known people who had to take drastic steps to help their family?
  
7. Both Mary and Joseph demonstrate sacrificial love toward Jesus. In what ways does our American culture’s holiday of Christmas keep us in touch with that sacrificial love, or perhaps distract us from that love?
  
8. How does the story of Joseph encourage those of us who are not having the holiday season we might have wanted?
  
9. During this Advent season, have you seen any of the characters of Christmas in a new way?

## **December 17, 2023 - Advent 2023: Characters of Christmas**

### **Mary**

#### **Luke 1: 26-38**

1. Think of a time when you were surprised by something that happened in your life. How did you respond?
2. Mary wasn't so sure that the angel Gabriel's greeting was good news (Luke 1:29). Good news doesn't always mean "trouble-free." How can we embrace "good news," even when there are potential obstacles ahead?
3. Notice in the text that the angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). Do you think those words brought comfort to Mary? How has a timely word spoken by someone brought comfort and joy into your life?
4. It is not every day that we are asked to be a part of something larger than life. Mary was being asked to be a part of "salvation history" (vs. 31-32). Please know that Mary was not a grown woman. More than likely, she was around 13-15 years of age when she received God's call to give life to the Son of God. No matter the age, how can we remain open to God's call upon us in the small and large moments of our lives?
5. Mary wanted to know the details. We want to know what's involved, what the cost will be, and whether or not we have the energy and ability to complete the task before us. The

reality is that often we do not receive the details until we first step out in faith. Can you think of a time that has been true in your life? How has that been evident when you are asked by someone to serve through the ministry of our church?

6. How do you think Mary reacted when she heard that Elizabeth was going to have a child in her old age? How does it help to know that others have been in similar situations as ourselves?
  
7. The angel Gabriel said, "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). How can we remember this promise when we are faced with trials and hardships? How can we retain joy in the midst of trials?
  
8. An often-quoted verse is Luke 1:38: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. What do you think would have happened if Mary said, "No?"  
Would the angel have tried to convince her otherwise?  
Would God have appointed someone else besides Mary?  
Thoughts???

## December 10, 2023 - Advent 2023: Characters of Christmas

### **John the Baptist**

#### **Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:(1-9) 10-14**

1. When was the last time you really had to *prepare* for something? Describe the scenario.
2. Advent is a season of preparation. What practices of preparation do you find meaningful during this season?
3. Mark begins his gospel not with Jesus but with John the Baptist. In a few words, how would you describe John's entrance into the scene?
4. Have you ever been in the "wilderness" in your life? (Perhaps a season of unfamiliarity or uncertainty?)
5. What are people motivated to do in response to John?
6. Notice Luke's description of John's conversations in Luke 3:10-14. What were people told to do?
7. In some ways, John is giving a wake-up call to the people near him, in preparation for the arrival of Jesus. Can you think of a time when you received a "wake-up call" in your life?
8. How does true repentance lead to true life change?

## **December 3, 2023 - Advent 2023: Characters of Christmas**

During these next few weeks of Advent, we will explore the supporting cast of characters that each do their part in allowing the story of Christ to unfold in their lives and in our world.

### **Zechariah and Elizabeth Luke 1:5-25, 57-66 (67-80)**

1. Luke is the only gospel that gives us a panoramic view of Zechariah and Elizabeth - the parents of John the Baptist. Why is that?
2. What role do Zechariah and Elizabeth play in the preparation for the Advent of the Messiah?
3. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both prayerful and blameless in the eyes of God. Yet Elizabeth was barren and could not have children. How can we support couples who cannot get pregnant and have children?
4. Finally, God answered the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and she became pregnant. Zechariah doubted God when he said to the angel Gabriel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18-19). Gabriel said to Zechariah, "And now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time" (Luke 1:20). Does this action seem rather harsh? How important is it that we have faith and believe what God asks of us?

5. Notice Elizabeth's reaction five months into her pregnancy: "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25). God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers in his time, not theirs. How can we as Christ-followers accept God's timing when it comes to waiting for an answer to our prayers? What can we learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth?
  
6. Zechariah and Elizabeth did not have anyone named John in their family. Their friends and relatives weren't going to accept what Elizabeth told them about the naming of the child and so they asked Zechariah. He firmly stated: "He is to be called John" (Luke 1:60). How important is a name? What significance does someone's name have?
  
7. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reveals the truth that God is in charge and still writing each of our stories. How can we be prayerful to God and open to the fact that he is not through with any of us yet? How can we embrace God's will and walk in faith?
  
8. After Zechariah affirmed that his son's name was John, his speech was restored. He began to praise God for his blessings. How can we remember to praise God in our trials and for our blessings?