

“Some Assembly Required”

Matthew 1:18-25

Series: Welcome the Child Week 3. Joseph

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Around this time of year we hear many joyful familiar phrases: “Merry Christmas”, “Happy New Year”, “Half off everything on Amazon.” But there are three words which strike terror in the hearts of parents everywhere: “Some Assembly Required.” I remember trying to put together a toy at 2 a.m. on Christmas morning that had missing pieces, broken parts and 36 pages of instructions written mostly in Chinese.

Today we hear another story from one who Welcomed the Child on the first Christmas. His life is in pieces. His heart, at times, is broken. The words “Some Assembly Required” are written across his soul. His name is Joseph of Nazareth. Normally he can assemble anything since he is a carpenter and construction worker. This man with rough splinter-scarred hands can easily fit pieces together with wooden dowels and mitered joints. Yet he just can’t assemble the pieces of his world.

Shalom aleichm b’shem Adonai my friends. I am Joseph son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar. I was born in Bethlehem the birthplace of my great ancestor David, the man after God’s own heart. He is the greatest king Israel has known. For a thousand years we have been waiting for one of his descendants to rise up and be a King like him: a just ruler who will liberate the people of Israel and walk according to God’s law. But don’t look at me. For all my royal blood, I am only a poor carpenter. I do not build empires but plows to till the fields, yokes to guide the oxen, benches for the day, beds for the night, houses for your family. No, I was not born to rule. But let me tell of another who is. It is an amazing story, and though I witnessed it with my own eyes, for many years the whole thing was a puzzle to me.

It starts when I am a young man, newly come to Nazareth to find work and hopefully begin a family. And I am successful on both accounts. The people of Nazareth are glad to have someone mend their furniture and farm tools. As for the family part, I meet a young woman: Miriam. Named after Moses’ sister, she is pure and sweet, a gentle soul that matches mine. And though love is not the most important concern of marriage in our culture, my heart is bound to hers. After a serious interview with her father, a covenant of engagement is drawn up and signed. A year before the wedding, we are betrothed and became husband and wife in all but the most intimate ways.

In such a small village we see each other often and frequently plan for the coming joyful day. But then, without a word, she disappears for three months. Her parents only say Miriam is visiting relatives down in the hill country of Judea. I sense they are hiding something from me. When she returns she tells me about her visit to a kinswoman named Elizabeth. I am filled with questions but I keep my peace because I see a strange mixture of fear and wonder in her eyes. And then she reveals she is three months pregnant.

Pregnant. The word stabs me like a spear. Emotions erupt in my soul. At first I am angry. She tries to explain how an angel named Gabriel told her the child in her womb is from the Holy Spirit, that he will be special. But I refuse to listen. I want to call off the marriage right away. I know I am neither the first nor the last man to hear such news. Yet I bet my

hammer and saw no man was ever told such a bizarre, outrageous lie. How can Miriam be so dishonest with me? Why can't she just tell me the truth? Why bring this shame upon me? My strong hands gripped her frail shoulders, but then...I stop and turn away. In spite of what she did, I still love Miriam. And I know if I tell the town she was unfaithful there is only one punishment...death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). I cannot let that happen. Calming myself I say, "Our marriage covenant is broken. But I will not speak a word of this to anyone. I suggest, for your own safety, you leave town. Perhaps return to your relative Elizabeth...at least until your child is born." After I make my decision clear, she runs from my carpenter shop in tears.

That night, as I nurse my hurt and toss in restless sleep, a being of incredible power and terrifying light appears in my dream. I can't describe to you what I saw. Yet somehow I know this brilliant messenger is from God. The angel says,

Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Miriam home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Yeshua, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

Though it is a dream, I carry those words in my memory for the rest of my life. Yet it takes nearly my whole life to understand what they mean. You call him Jesus. But we call him Yeshua or Joshua. It means, "The Lord is Salvation." This child will be a Savior. He will save his people. But what kind of Savior? Maybe one like Joshua the warrior general who led the lightning conquest of the Promised Land. Many say we need a savior, a Messiah like his father David, like his namesake Joshua to drive out the Romans. It appears God's timing is perfect. For this Savior is just what we need now.

After I apologize to Miriam and we resume our engagement, the Emperor, sitting in his palace on the other side of the world, decrees all his subjects must go to their hometowns to register and pay taxes. Honestly I am relieved to leave Nazareth where the gossip and rumors about Miriam and me are increasing in proportion to the size of her belly. But for her sake, I am sorry she must endure the long three day journey to my hometown of Bethlehem in the last weeks of her pregnancy. And then, to add insult to injury, when we arrive there is not a single guestroom available among my kinsmen. Either we squeeze in on the floor among my relatives or among their animals. Trust me, if you know my relatives you'll understand why we chose the animals.

Soon, after we settle in, Miriam tells me the baby is coming. Like any new father I am nervous and excited. I know nothing about delivering babies but that doesn't stop the baby from coming. Soon the cry of those strong healthy lungs fills the cold air. Tears fill my eyes as I cradle this little life. Oh, there is nothing miraculous about the birth except for the usual miracle when God brings a new life into the world. After Miriam nurses and wraps him tight in scraps of cloth, I rock little Yeshua in my arms. When finally he quiets down, she tells me to put him in the only dry place, a feeding trough for cattle. How funny: the son of a carpenter who could have a hand carved cradle spends his first night in a stone manger. This is a strange birthplace for the Messiah who will conquer the world. Another piece of the puzzle I cannot put together.

It has been a long day and night and eventually we doze off. But our sleep is disturbed by a band of shepherds. I assume they want to board their animals. I prepare to defend our claim on the cave. When they rush to the manger I fear they will steal the child. Yet they calm my worry by telling us another unbelievable story. An army of angels sent them to look for a baby who will be the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The strangest visit comes after we take up residence in Bethlehem. When Yeshua is almost two, Persian priests from beyond the desert arrived at our door. They make offerings of the most exquisite, expensive gifts I have ever seen. But it really shocks me to see these wise old star gazers get down on their arthritic knees and worship our little boy. We Jews are forbidden to worship any human, even a king. Another piece in this bizarre puzzle.

In one way they were not *wise* men. They announced there is a new King for Israel to the current king. Herod and his Roman sponsors are shocked to hear a new King will overthrow them. True to his jealous heart, Herod sends soldiers to Bethlehem to destroy all the infant and toddler boys. Again, through a dream an angel directs us to flee to Egypt. It is a tense night as we slip between the shadows of houses and alleys. Miriam tries to keep Yeshua quiet. I look over my shoulder at the sound of every footstep. How did I, a simple carpenter, get wrapped up in all of this? I am a fugitive on the run, a refuge from my homeland for a child that is not mine.

After two years the Lord sends another dream telling us we can return - the murderous Herod is dead. As we make our Exodus from Egypt, I wonder if crowds will be waiting to welcome us and hail little Yeshua as the promised King of Israel, the Savior, the Messiah. But when we arrive on the border of Judea we are only greeted by the fearful news that Herod's equally blood thirsty son Archelaus reigns on his father's throne. I tell Miriam the only safe place for us is to return to Nazareth. There may still be some gossip but in time it will settle down.

Once again I set up my carpenter shop in that little Galilean village. Years roll by and Yeshua becomes my apprentice. Miriam and I have our own sons: Jacob, Joseph, Simeon, Judah and daughters as well but I love Yeshua as my own.

Only once did he ever cause us alarm. At twelve years old, just on the verge of manhood, we go up with all our kinfolk to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This trip is the highlight of Yeshua's year. After the celebration we are about a day's journey from Jerusalem when Miriam asks me if I know where Yeshua is. I assume he is with Miriam's parents. But they have not seen him. If you have ever misplaced your child, you understand the terror. Leaving our other children with my in-laws, we race back across the hills and roads. For three days we comb the crowded streets of the holy city looking for him. Finally, we ascend the steps to the Temple. There, seated among the priests and teachers of the Law, sits young Yeshua asking questions and amazing them with his answers. I am so angry he put us through all this. Yet Miriam, in her gentle way, quiets me. Turning to Yeshua she asks, "Son, why have you put us through all this? For the last three days we've been worried sick about you." I am ready to teach him a lesson. But his answer stops us short. He simply replies, "Why didn't you come here first? Didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?" For the last twelve years I considered him my son. His words bring back the painful truth of those early years. His reply reopens the wound first inflicted when his mother told me she was pregnant. He is not my son. But whose son is he? This is the puzzle I cannot put together.

As year succeeds year, the pieces haunt me day and night. The visions of angels, the visits of shepherds and wise men, the vengeance of kings. Why? Who is this boy growing up in my house? What is the meaning of all this and what is my part in it? The strangest mystery in the whole story is that nothing happens. After all the amazing messengers that welcome this child into the world, he seems no different than any other. He labors by my side in the carpenter shop with rough hands, strengthening muscles and sweat on his forehead. As we work, we talk of stories from the Scriptures. When we build ladders he likes to talk about how our father Jacob dreamed of a ladder which stretched from earth to heaven. I keep wondering and waiting for the day when he will become King, destroy the Romans and rule over all people. But that day never comes. Eventually I decide those angelic dreams were just...dreams. So I dismiss all the pieces of this mysterious puzzle from my mind. In time I turn sick and die without ever seeing a single prophecy or dream fulfilled.

Yet in the last year of my life, the Lord is gracious to me. He allows me to glimpse the answer to this puzzle. One day, when we finish working on a cradle in the carpenter shop, Yeshua, with one of his usual deep questions looks at the cradle and asks, "Why are we born?" After some thought, I reply, "We are born to give glory to God in heaven." I think this will satisfy him. But then he looks over to my workbench where an unfinished coffin lies and asks, "Why do we die?" As I lift the cradle to take it outside the shop I answer, "We die because our father Adam sinned on earth." Then, as I walk a few steps outside the door I hear Yeshua say, "This is why my Father sent me." I turn to say, "What do you mean, I'm your fath..." But I stop and what I see steals the rest of my words. Yeshua stands in the doorway, stretching his arms to touch the doorframe. The afternoon sun shines upon him and casts a shadow, a shadow lying over the coffin on the bench, a shadow in the shape of a cross.

And then, like lightning, all the pieces of the puzzle fall together. For the first time the words I heard in a dream so many years ago make sense, "you shall call his name Yeshua for he will save his people...*from their sins.*" He did not come to save us from our enemies, the Romans. No, he came to save us from a worse enemy...ourselves. He comes to save us from our own sins...and the death we deserve.

The words of Isaiah hit me, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel which means God with us." Of course! That's why the wise men worshiped him. That's why the shepherds searched for the Lord who will bring God and sinners together. There, standing before me in the body of a young man, is my Lord and my God. God is with me. God is with us.

I am so overwhelmed by the whole thing I start to laugh out loud. Only God has the sense of humor to become a carpenter, a builder of ladders and bridges, a person who puts things together. For one day, Yeshua the carpenter will build a ladder with his cross that stretches from earth to heaven, he will build a bridge to unite God and us. One day Yeshua the carpenter will put God and us together.

And then I look down and see the cradle still in my arms. And it all came home to me. The purpose of my life is not to hammer and saw wood, but to welcome God's Son into this world and to make it possible for others to receive him as well. Yeshua, Jesus, came into my life and assembled all the pieces. He put my world together. And he can do it for you.