

## ❶ **【Joseph's Agony】**

It is now the third week of Advent. Today I would like to speak from the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, the central figure is not Mary but Joseph. An angel appeared to Joseph, announced the birth of the Savior, and commanded him to name the child Jesus. This is because this Gospel was written for the Jewish people, seeking to convey that Jesus is indeed the Savior, the descendant of David.

Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came together, it was discovered that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Since Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose her publicly, he decided to divorce her quietly. (verses 18-20) Mary and Joseph were betrothed. According to the customs of Israel at that time, even during betrothal, they were legally considered "husband and wife." It was then that Joseph was informed Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was a man who believed in God, but where was the proof of conception by the Holy Spirit? He had never heard of such a thing before. Joseph himself must have agonized over this. If he made this public, people would say she had conceived through another man, and Mary would be punished for adultery. After much struggle, the answer he came to was to "divorce her quietly, without making it public." It says he "resolved," so I imagine his heart had been deeply troubled up to that point.

## ❷ **【God's word gives us assurance】**

Joseph had secretly decided to divorce Mary, but that night an angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

The angel addressed Joseph as "Joseph, son of David." Joseph was indeed a descendant of David. But the angel was not emphasizing that lineage; rather, he was saying, "You are a descendant of the faithful David. Take courage and believe in God." Faith is a struggle against unbelief, and it involves feeling fear. Dreams were a means of "divine revelation" in those days. Joseph did not dismiss this dream as merely a dream; he believed it as the word of God. When he awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife, becoming the legal father of Jesus. In the Bible, "sleep" is a word used to symbolize unbelief, and "awakening" means believing God's word. Therefore, Joseph awoke from his hesitation and awakened to faith. It was God's word that gave Joseph

faith. By God's word, Joseph overturned his own judgment and began walking forward with courage. It feels as though his fear was cast off.

●The Japan YWCA's official journal featured this passage from a message by Pastor Miyako Tonedachi: "In Jewish society, for a father to name his child meant acknowledging that child as his own. Accepting a woman accused of adultery was never seen as an act of tolerance in that society, and such a husband or fiancé was also regarded as a sinner who had turned away from God. ... Considering the immense disadvantage he faced by choosing to live with Mary, we cannot simply see him as a weak, indecisive man. Rather, ... we cannot help but feel the strength of selfless love in Joseph, who chose a way of life that prioritized the desperate situation of the one in need of his protection—the one only he could defend—over his own interests and honor, unable to overlook her plight. For Joseph, living with Mary meant bearing the stigma and humiliation of being treated as a sinner. Yet Joseph accepted this, understanding it as God's will, and bore it.

Joseph was strengthened by God's word. God's word can strengthen people.

### ③ **【God is with us】**

Matthew interpreted this event as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14), meaning "God is with us." Long ago, when the city of Jerusalem was besieged by enemies, the prophet Isaiah told King Ahaz, "God will surely protect Jerusalem, so be at peace. If you are anxious, ask for a sign." But Ahaz, saying he couldn't possibly trust God in such a situation, refused to ask for a sign. In response to Ahaz's unbelief, God unilaterally gave a sign: "A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son." Similarly, Matthew interpreted Mary's conception and birth of Jesus as a sign of God protecting and saving the world. The Christmas event is a demonstration that, despite our human unbelief and sinfulness, God remains with us.

I used to think that when people sinned, God would leave them. But I've come to believe that's not true. If God were to leave, how could people be cleansed? It is precisely because dirty laundry mixes with water and becomes one with it that the filth is transferred to the water. If a doctor doesn't stay with the patient and touch their body, how could the patient be healed? It is precisely because God dwells with sinners and touches them that people are cleansed and healed. That is why God remains with sinners. Though God is with humanity, people often fail to recognize His presence because they do not seek to be with Him. Therefore, God became human, walking visibly alongside us to demonstrate His presence. That is Jesus Christ. For thirty years, Jesus lived silently among sinners. During His subsequent three years of ministry, He ate with the lowly, became a friend to the poor, the sick, the disabled, and sinners. He was baptized with sinners and was

crucified as one of the criminals. He was always with sinners. There was never a time He was not. Yet, the people around Him at that time never believed that God was right in their midst, no, right beside them.

●In the letter to Timothy, there is a passage that reads: “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. ... Yet the Lord stood by me and gave me strength” (2 Timothy 4:16-17). Ayako Sono wrote the following about this passage: “I believe people truly encounter others in sorrow. Often, it is in such times that humans encounter God. For it is only in sorrow that people return to their essential human heart. Therefore, we may have to fall to the very depths of sorrow and loneliness. Only then do we meet God standing beside us.”

God is not only with us in times of suffering; in truth, God is always with us. Yet it is only in suffering that we first see God. Life is a journey to encounter this God who is with us, a journey of awakening. Christ is the One who was born with you, ate with you, laughed with you, wept with you, labored with you, bore your sins with you, suffered with you, died with you, and rose again with you. The Gospel of Matthew frames its beginning and end with these words: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). May we become people who see Christ, who is with us.