

Believe the Unbelievable
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Matthew 1:28-25 translation by professor and theologian Richard W. Swanson

18 The birthing of Jesus the Messiah was this way: After his mother was promised in marriage to Joseph, before they came together, she was found having a baby in her belly out of a holy breath.

19 Joseph, her man, being strict and not wanting to expose her publicly, chose secretly to divorce her. 20 After he had planned this, look, a messenger of haShem in a dream appeared to him. He said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to make Mary, your wife: The thing father in her out of a breath is from the holy one. 21 She will give birth to a son and you will call his name Jesus, for he will rescue his people from their sins. 22 This whole thing has happened in order that it might be fulfilled, the word spoke by haShem, through the prophet who said,

23 "Look, the virgin will have a baby in her belly, and she will give birth to a son and they will call his name Emmanuel which is, translated, 'God is with us.'"

24 When Joseph got up from sleep, he did as it was ordered him by the messenger of haShem. He took his wife. 25 He did not know her up until she gave birth to a son. He called his name Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel version, Jesus' conception and birth are rushed, just a verse here or there, very professional, concise and fact-based; not like the gospels of Mark and Luke that provide many details in more story-like fashion. Matthew begins with 17 verses detailing the very precise and specific patriarchal lineage of Jesus, starting with Abraham. Then abruptly we shift to brevity...

- Mary was pregnant. She gave birth. The boy was to be named Jesus.

With Matthew, it's practically a requirement that we flesh-out the story, we have to read between the lines, otherwise we miss out on so much and then, what are we to believe?

Verse 18 says that Mary was found to have a baby in her belly out of a holy breath. **WE** know that she's pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but does Joseph know that? We can honestly ask that question. What exactly did Joseph know and when?

Joseph is engaged to be married to Mary and before they're married, before they have a chance to "know each other," she's found to be pregnant.

You're sitting there with Joseph ... what do you say to him? What would you want to know?

Is Mary really pregnant?

What did she say?

Did she actually say that this Gabriel guy was an angel of the Lord?

What are you going to do?

Will you go through with the marriage?

Do you believe her?

Mary was promised **TO** Joseph. It's first century Galilee, a Roman occupied town, a patriarchal time; Do we even know that Joseph spoke with Mary? It's possible that maybe he hasn't even met her yet. This news could be coming to Joseph through others, probably family members.

What does Joseph do? He could do one of two things:

- 1) Stay with a potentially unfaithful fiancé
- 2) Break-off the engagement

Because of the context – time and place – option #1 is seen as the harder choice to make. Staying with Mary and having word potentially get around that she was unfaithful paints both she and he, unfavorably. She as a slut and him as a fool. Option #2 was much easier. Again, because of the time and place, and scripture – he had the right to "dismiss her."

According to Deuteronomy 22:22-27

"If a young woman who is a virgin is engaged to one man and another man meets up with her in a town and has sex with her, you must bring both of them to the city gates there and stone them until they die—the young woman because she didn't call for help in the city, and the man because of the fact that he humiliated his neighbor's wife. Remove such evil from your community!

But if the man met up with the engaged woman in a field, grabbing her and having sex with her there, only the man will die. Don't do anything whatsoever to the young woman. She hasn't committed any capital crime—rather, this situation is exactly like the one where someone attacks his neighbor and kills him. Since the man met up with her in a field, the engaged woman may well have called out for help, but there was no one to rescue her.

If a man meets up with a young woman who is a virgin and not engaged, grabs her and has sex with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who had sex with her must give fifty silver shekels to the young woman's father. She will also become his wife because he has humiliated her. He is never allowed to divorce her."

So, what did Joseph do?

Well, - we don't know a lot of the messy details. We don't know if he investigated whether Mary's conception happened in a field. We don't know if he tried to "find the culprit who impregnated her or not." We don't know if he even considered any of the laws from Deuteronomy. It appears that he intended to disregard the law and was planning to get out of the marriage. He was going to divorce her, dismiss her – and do it quietly and secretly.

Joseph is said to be a strict, just, rightly, righteous, and a noble man. How righteous was Joseph? Was he righteous because he was ditching her in secret? That doesn't seem too right to me. The story might be unbelievable, but what reason would Mary have to lie to him? I can appreciate that he might have had doubts. I imagine that if I were in his situation, I'd probably have done the same thing. But, I do believe that he was trying to be kind to her in trying to save her reputation in the town. But the question still on my mind is, "Did he believe her?"

Ultimately, David was kind and righteous, with some guidance from God.

This past week, historical events have transpired in Washington D.C. There was (actually, for a long time there has been) a lot of he said-she said, this and that, and back and forth with information, testimonies and reports. If you listened to any of the televised statements from members of Congress, you were probably saying, "Are these people talking about the same issue? What these people are saying and what those people are saying are starkly different, but they're supposedly talking about the same situation. I don't know what or who to believe?" You're not alone. Some unbelievable things are happening.

On Thursday, Mark Galli, the retiring editor-in-chief of the publication, *Christianity Today*, wrote an op-ed about these events, more specifically about the President of the United States. For those who might not know, *Christianity Today*, is a religious publication that was founded in 1956 by Billy Graham. He began the publication in part to provide an alternative to another religious publication called *The Christian Century*. With *Christianity Today*, Graham said, "he wanted to plant the evangelical flag in the middle-of-the-road, taking the conservative theological position but a definite liberal approach to social problems."

The op-ed written on Thursday made big headlines, because this religiously conservative, evangelical publication said some not-so-very-nice-things about the POTUS, specifically calling him, immoral and supporting his removal from office. It was seen as highly newsworthy and even shocking. The POTUS and many evangelicals are rebuking Mr. Galli, while opponents of the POTUS are gleefully throwing the opinion in Franklin Graham's face. Everyone is jumping on this story as a partisan and political bombshell, detrimental to the POTUS and his political party.

Regardless of one's political party, one's views on the POTUS or the impeachment, the editor is being vilified and his opinion is being maligned and manipulated. That's because people are

looking at this religious publication through a political lens. In that op-ed, Galli's most profound reminder to everyone is being overlooked. In regard to the POTUS, his administration and the impeachment, Galli said, "**remember who you are and whom you serve.**"

Whether you're conservative or liberal, democratic, republican or independent, American or non-American, Christian, Muslim or Jewish...Galli focused on what we all need to remember; our faith should speak to our politics and not vice versa.

Never forget that Jesus **was** political; he was so because his faith led him to be. Our faith, our God, the core foundations of what we believe as Christians, should guide us in all that we say and do – not society, not humanity and certainly not politics.

NOT until an angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream to tell him to not be afraid, did Joseph believe. He struggled to believe Mary, but he believed the Lord.

What do we believe?

I don't what to believe, so what do I do?

Trust in your faith.

Return to your God for guidance.

Remember that the foundation of our lives is rooted in mercy, compassion and love.

Remember that in the most difficult of circumstances, **the divine chose to become flesh**

- to an unwed, teenager whose people were living under occupation
- to a young family who would become asylum seekers in a foreign land, hopeful that they would not be turned away at the border
- to a poor and powerless family with nothing; who would receive support from the wealthy around them

The divine stepped in and showed Joseph love.

The divine guided Joseph's actions –

- Stay in this relationship.
- Be a parent to this child.
- Be courageous by **not** following the status quo.
- dare to rebel the system like your child Emmanuel will do.
- Don't "do right by her" in the eyes of mere men, but do right by her in the eyes of God.
- listen to this woman.
- support this woman.
- believe this woman.

Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God and being righteous takes courage.
Being receptive to and following the Divine means being unpopular.
It is risky to put your faith in the unbelievable.

Don't know what to believe?

That's ok.

Focus on love – God will help you to do what it is right.

AMEN