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Matthew 1:18-25  
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## The Impossible Choice

The story of Jesus begins with a scandal! Mary is pregnant, and her husband Joseph is not the father!

This scandal matters to us gathered here today. There is this expectation that church is where we've got it all together. However, life is often more complicated. Jesus did not come into the world with an ideal family situation. Joseph saw only two choices, to divorce Mary quietly or expose her to an adultery trial. He thought he was doing the best he could. But then God opened a whole can of beans.

As we read this ancient text, I must give you some context.

The other important detail is that the angel says that Mary conceived her child from the Holy Spirit. Let's put aside the divine parentage aspect because this can be a stumbling block for modern ears. Furthermore, Richard Gardner suggests this is not about who Jesus's baby daddy is, but about the Holy Spirit giving life where it is otherwise impossible. In the Old Testament, there are three examples of elderly or barren women conceiving. Sarah, mother of Isaac, Manoah's wife, mother of Samson, and Hannah, mother of Samuel. In each case, God intervened by sending an angel that announced the name and fate of the child to be born. Here, Mary is unique because she is a young woman.

Isaac became one of the three patriarchs of the Israelites, a venerated ancestor for many peoples. Samson was a great judge and warrior who protected young Israel from its enemies. Samuel was a great priest, who warned the people against having a king, but then relented and crowned Saul and David. The result of when God gets involved in creating life is a monumental change. So God is doing a new thing, making life for a purpose.

The quote from Isaiah seven further supports the theme of God restoring by creating something new. The young women shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, God with us. This prophetic quote comes from a dark time in King Ahaz of Judah's life. Armies were invading from the north, and defeat seemed inevitable. Ahaz thinks his only choices are to win the war or surrender, but Isaiah tells him to survive. So Isaiah showed Ahaz a sign: your wife will give birth to Hezekiah, who will be a king like no other. King Hezekiah will fend off Judah's enemies and restore proper worship of God.

So Joseph is like the unbelieving Abraham and King Ahaz, who cannot conceive of God creating a way out of no way. God made a third option when only two were thought possible. Operating outside of binaries tells us a lot about Jesus. Jesus is going to do amazing things, and Jesus is going to show people the third choice when only two seem possible.

How can we apply this to our own lives? Today we are stuck with many situations where we think we only have two choices. Two political parties, do you believe or deny COVID? Is it Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays? When I think about all these choices, I often act like Joseph and choose the kinder options. Or I decide whatever the people I love are choosing. Yes, I try to be wise, but I am only human. But I am increasingly trying to open myself up to what the third choice is. The third choice is something outside the middle or a compromise. How could the compromise between divorce and divorce be to marry Mary? No, God is calling us beyond kindness. Beyond what our culture says is right and wrong. God is calling us to be restorers. To follow Jesus, who set people free from both the lesser and greater evils. I am growing to believe that the Jesus journey is about having our minds and hearts open to the impossible thing God wants to do in this world.

I'll end with Josh Groban's song, the impossible dream.

"To dream the impossible dream  
To fight the unbeatable foe  
To bear with unbearable  
sorrow

And to run where the brave dare not go  
And the world will be better for this

That one man, scorned and covered with scars  
Still strove with his last ounce of  
courage  
To reach the unreachable star."