

Monday, December 4. Read Matthew 1:18-19, Psalm 18:28-30, Isaiah 43:1-4

As Matthew told it, the story of Jesus' birth began with Joseph engaged to Mary. He learned she was pregnant, and knew he had not done anything to father a child. No divine messenger had visited Joseph to tell him what was happening. As a devout man, feeling pain and disappointment as his dreams fell apart, he likely sought comfort in Scriptures like today's. Isaiah 43 came in a section of the book many mainline scholars call "Second Isaiah." It spoke first to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. It emphasized God's personal bond with God's people—"I will be with you....I love you." It did not promise an easy, pain-free life, but pledged that whatever happened, God's presence was dependable. How could such a passage speak to Joseph's hurting heart? How does it speak to you today? Have you ever faced a situation that, even if not as severe as Joseph's, involved some of the same feelings? A time when someone you trusted let you down, and you had to face pain, disappointment, perhaps anger, perhaps tears, certainly shock? How can passages like Psalm 18 and Isaiah 43 give you a spiritual foundation from which to move ahead in putting your life back together at times like that?

Tuesday, December 5. Read Matthew 1:18-20, Deuteronomy 22:20-24 In Israelite culture, a betrothal was as binding as marriage. When Mary, betrothed to Joseph became pregnant, it led Joseph at first to the "obvious" belief that she had been intimate with some other man. Personally painful as that was, Joseph quickly began to realize that the situation might cost Mary's life. If he denounced her publicly, she might be stoned to death

(see John 8:3-5), as the law in Deuteronomy said. He sought a different solution, even though it might let some people blame him for her pregnancy. Matthew, with just a few words, reported something important even before Joseph had his dream about the angel: "Joseph her husband was a righteous man... he didn't want to humiliate her." What do you learn about Joseph's inner qualities from his measured response ("he decided to call off their engagement quietly")? In the book *Safe People*, Cloud and Townsend list Biblically based qualities of "safe people." How safe for others are you? Like Joseph, do you choose not to humiliate others? The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* said Joseph was "a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege—siring his firstborn son—in order to obey God's will." Have you had to give up some cherished dream to obey God, or might you have to? If so, how are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?

Wednesday, December 6. Read Matthew 1:1-17. The way Matthew started Jesus' story feels strange, even boring, to most of us. Family records were a key source of identity in Jesus' day. King Herod the Great, despised by most Jews because he was half Edomite, actually destroyed official registers so that no one else could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew said three significant things about

Jesus: he called him "Christ," the "son of David," and the "son of Abraham." The Greek word "Christ," like the Hebrew word "Messiah," meant "anointed one." It was commonly used to identify the deliverer God had promised to send. What do you believe made Jesus' link to Abraham and King David so key for Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that, in Jesus, God kept the ancient promises made to those men? In an unusual move for his time, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus' genealogy. The other four (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah"—i.e. Bathsheba) had all, like Mary, faced obstacles, even scandal, in their lives. Yet God had worked through each of them to advance the story of God's redeeming mission in the world. Does God still work through unlikely people? In what ways is God at work through you?

Thursday, December 7. Read Genesis 39:2-10, 41:39-43. Jesus' earthly father Joseph was named for a great man in Israel's history. The first Joseph was the patriarch Jacob's favorite son (born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel). Genesis devoted chapters 37-50 to his story. Known for his integrity and reliability, he eventually reached a position from which he saved Egypt (and Jacob's family) from a great famine. In Bible times, as often happens today, parents would choose names that captured the character they hoped and prayed their child would develop. What traits from his great namesake in the Hebrew past could a humble working man like Joseph emulate and live into? Do you bear a name associated with any admirable person, either in your own family or from history? If so, what qualities does that name suggest to you? What qualities is God working into your character through the challenges and opportunities you face in life? In what ways do you want your "name" (whether it is famous or obscure) to be remembered?

Friday, December 8. Read Luke 11:11-13, Mark 14:36. We gain a sense of how Joseph went about being a father figure to young Jesus by looking at how Jesus spoke about fathers in his teaching. The failure of too many human fathers, and increasing awareness of the sexism built into many Western cultures, lead us to be cautious in using words like “father” to identify God. But Jesus’ parable after teaching the Lord’s Prayer showed fathers as giving. When Jesus prayed, he used the term “*abba*” (Aramaic for “dad”). Jesus’ words in Luke 11 assumed that it was unthinkable that a father would respond to a child’s needs with anything other than an effort to give the best possible gifts. Was that a realistic assumption for you to make about your father or other father figures in your life? If so, how has that shaped the ways you relate to others? If not, how have other people (and God) helped to fill in the gaps left by your father’s failures? The apostle Paul adopted the prayer practice that Mark reported of Jesus, encouraging believers to cry out to our heavenly “*abba*” in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. What are your prayers like? Are you able to speak with God comfortably and trustingly, as you would to an infinitely wise and caring father, or do your prayers tend to be more stiff, formal and limited to “safe” subjects? How can you become more at home with your heavenly *abba*?