

How often do you move from day to day with no changes or new inspiration? What does it take to change your direction or bring new purpose and joy to life? Has it ever been a dream? Or a message from an angel? Well, one such night did all of this for Joseph, and what a change that brought about!

In the world of Joseph and Mary, once a couple was engaged it was the same as marriage. And for a couple to separate took a divorce and all the drama and tongue wagging that the village might add after the fact. Before Joseph and Mary had consummated their marriage, she found herself to be pregnant. Joseph had to have been terribly hurt. But he was a loving man and decided to quietly divorce Mary. He didn't want to hurt her any more than necessary. She knew from her own angel visit what was going on, but until this night, Joseph didn't know the story. If the village were to discover her pregnancy, she would be shunned and the ramifications for Joseph's carpentry business could be devastating.

What choice did he have? Painful as it was, he had made a decision. Amazingly a dream and an angel changed Joseph's mind, and he gave Mary a second chance. And that theme permeates the rest of the Gospel message!

Luke tells Christmas through Mary's eyes. Matthew shares Good News from the perspective of Joseph. He became the mentor and protector for Mary's unborn son. Consider what a role model he must have been, and how the gifts of second chances and grace were in Jesus' earthly life from day one!

We face a similar experiences as we look back at our indiscretions and missed opportunities. A marriage ends or counseling saves it. Substance abuse is finally confronted, or the reality of a death is finally accepted. For others, the realization comes that college is over and it is time to find a real job. Suddenly we wake up.

Do you pay attention to your dreams? Have angels ever spoken to you? How does God break into your sleepwalking and darkness? It is so appropriate that the Gospel concerning Jesus, the Messiah, begins with a story of second chances! Through Joseph's change of heart, and his faithful love, we are introduced to the gift of grace which would be at the heart of Jesus' entire life and ministry for us!

The real scandal of the story of Mary and Joseph is NOT about an unwed mom or Joseph's willingness to humiliate himself in the community, but that MY sin necessitates God's help! You and I are the reasons God has gone to such lengths to share his grace! God's love is so intense that it is only fitting for Jesus to be born in such a setting. As ludicrous as it appears to the world, God stoops to our level to lift us to His.

It is almost as if God said, "Let's make this rescue journey as difficult as possible!" And so the story began with a dilemma for the earthly parents to be of Jesus. And then the Son of God began life in a manger, not on a throne. Rather than a life of luxury he would die on a cross. Instead of asking the world to bow at his feet, he descended into the darkness of my death to wrestle with Satan and through grace restore us to life.

*How tragic that so many sleep through this Good News and never become aware of its life-changing power! How many could benefit from such a "wake-up" call?*

Matthew helps our Christmas preparations by lifting Joseph as a role model. He would be the earthly father of Jesus, and from "day one" consider his willingness to be an example of God's forgiving love. In doing so he became a powerful role model for us as well. Joseph is the model of grace, as rather than doing what was demanded by the law he did what no one ever would have expected.

His willingness to pay attention to God's message, rather than rolling over and going back to sleep allowed for any possibility that God might offer. His trust in the message allowed him to see beyond his needs and accept whatever God offered.

Joseph was willing to LIVE BY FAITH, despite the consequences. His life became a prophetic example of sacrifice his adopted son would later offer from the cross. Before John the Baptist announced the coming of a new kingdom, Joseph already was a living example of the grace, second chances, and new life that this kingdom would bring. What a powerful way for us to remember what we are getting ready for!

Christmas is so much more than just a day of extravagance and celebration. It is the prelude to a lifetime of commitment, lifestyle of faith. Our Advent journey has been shaking sleepy lives and saying, "Get ready! Angels have been singing and dreams have been revealed. Pay attention to what God is doing for you!

"The Heart Mender," by Andy Andrews is the true story of a young army wife during WW2. She was living in Florida while her husband served in Europe, where he was killed on the battlefield. At the same time, a young German submarine officer was on a secret mission off the coast of Florida.

Every U Boat had an SS officer to keep the crew in line. This captain hated the Nazi's and resisted the orders of his Nazi handler. He was shot and thrown overboard in the Gulf of Mexico. Half dead, he washed up on the shore where the widow stumbled across him on a tear filled morning walk on the beach.

She saw his German uniform and had to make a quick decision. She couldn't let him die, and decided to take him home to nurse him to health. At the same time she feared for what might happen if authorities found a German sailor, during wartime, in the home of a widow of an American soldier.

Keeping him hidden, she struggled with the potential scandal this would cause. Her act of servant love might not be understood in the context of the climate of war. And this man was part of the same enemy that had killed her husband! And yet, she placed his safety above that of her own reputation and future. This is a story of second chances.

This story reminds us that, like Joseph, make many difficult choices. We never know what they will be or when they will come, but when our eyes and ears are open; we will be ready to share the gift of grace. This is what the gift that Christmas brings.

Allow Joseph's FAITH to help you follow different path. *More miraculous than Jesus is what his GIFT opens in us!* Joseph, in his own way, becomes the first witness of the gift that Jesus brings! What a story of Good News Christmas will be!

And now it is our turn, as we learn from Joseph, becoming today's "Christmas angels;" called to waken a world around us from the slumbering darkness of an eternal sleep.

From the beginning, Matthew makes sure we know that the Christmas story IS all about second chances! This is the Good News we call Grace! Amen