



## Who-Ville: MAXimizing Christmas

**Matthew 1:18-25**

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In this season of Advent, we're having a little fun with Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. While often thought of as little more than a fun Christmas flick, the animated feature and classic children's story is chalk full of connections with the Christmas story of the Biblical text.

I'm not sure about you, but if I were asked to name the characters of the *Grinch*, there's little missing the Grinch himself, and it's hard to forget sweet Cindy-Lou Who. The rest of the Whos down in Whoville all tend to blend into one lump population, with no other Who standing out as being of any significance. But the one character that I often tend to overlook, one who plays a fairly significant role in the story, is none other than Max, the dog.

Upon seeing the decorations being hung, upon seeing the food being prepared, and upon hearing the joyous raucous climbing the mountainside, the Grinch is prepared to do something to stop the boisterous Whos, so he proclaims:

*"Why for fifty-three years I've put up with it now!  
I must stop Christmas from coming! But how?"*

*Then he got an idea! An awful idea!  
The Grinch got a wonderful, awful idea!*

*"I know just what to do!" The Grinch laughed in his throat.  
"I'll make a quick Santy Claus hat and a coat."*

*And he chuckled, and clucked, "What a great grinchy trick!  
With this coat and this hat, I'll look just like Saint Nick!"*

*"All I need is a reindeer." The Grinch looked around.  
But since reindeer are scarce, there was none to be found.*

*Did that stop the Grinch? Hah! The Grinch simply said,  
"If I can't find a reindeer, I'll make one instead!"*

*So he took his dog Max, and he took some black thread.  
And he tied a big horn on top of his head."*

Poor Max – the dog is none-too-excited to be part of the Grinch’s master plan. He hides and tries to avoid having anything to do with the plan the Grinch is enacting. He was, rightly so, scared of the Grinch’s wonderful, awful idea.

Max’s role is, oddly enough, not that dissimilar from the role of Joseph in the story of Christ’s birth.

No, I’m not saying that Joseph is little more than a dressed up, sleigh-pulling, dog ... though, if you think of the pictures of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, Joseph is almost always in front pulling the donkey’s lead line.

But no, it is not the reindeer-esque role of Joseph leading Mary to Bethlehem that stands out, it is Joseph’s desire to have nothing to do with the master plan.

If Mark’s introduction to Christ’s birth, from which we read last week, is missing the Hallmark nativity characters all-together, then Matthew’s version is the antithesis of the Hallmark picture. Once again, there are no shepherds, there is no manger, and there is no inn keeper. In chapter 2 we get to the Magi’s appearance, but they won’t appear for a couple years after Jesus’ birth. In the story of the birth itself, found in just the first chapter of Matthew, the focus is on the lineage of Jesus down through Joseph.

I say Matthew’s recollection of the birth story is the antithesis of the Hallmark vision because there is nothing peaceful or serene about Joseph’s preparation for the birth. To understand the complication of Joseph’s story, we must understand the story in the context of the first century middle-east.

In verse 1-17 there are 40 steps of lineage connecting Jesus back to Abraham. All 40 steps are traced through the father figure. There are five women mentioned in the text connecting Jesus to Abraham, but the lineage is traced through the father’s line in all 40 steps. This is an important detail as it grounds this text firmly in a patriarchal society, where in the husband is central and important, and the wife – or mother – is but a side note.

You may wonder, why is such a detail important? ... I’m glad you asked.

First, it should be noted that Joseph is a necessary step in this lineage in order for Jesus to be connected to the root of Jesse’s tree and to be of the House of David. These are both important connections to the voice of the prophets, which we claim are preparing the people of Israel for this birth – for this messiah. It is only by giving Joseph the paternal rights to name this child that Jesus is able to be rightly grafted on to the lineage that has been proclaimed in the Jewish history.

But more importantly, the patriarchal societal norms are what allow us to make sense of Joseph’s initial reaction to the news of Mary’s pregnancy.

Joseph and Mary are engaged – meaning that Joseph’s parents and Mary’s parents have arranged a marriage for the two. Mary is but an early teenage girl, whose family is likely offering up a healthy dowry for Joseph to take her as his wife. But don’t think this is a poor arrangement. Joseph is the kind of man you want your daughter to marry. He’s a respectable man, who is devout in his faith, and is already trained as a carpenter, so there’s an expectation that he will be able to provide for Mary.

They have not yet consecrated the marriage and made the family arrangement official. While they’re waiting for the marital agreement to be confirmed, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. This is where things get messy ... according to the Biblical text, Joseph has every right to call her out for her unfaithfulness. If her promiscuous pregnancy is made public, she is at risk of being stoned to death in the public square. Yeah – you done messed up now Mary. Imagine Hallmark trying to portray that chain of events in one of its Christmas movies.

See, Joseph is a devout man – a direct descendent of King David. He knows it is well within the religious law for him to dismiss Mary, and to call attention to her pregnancy. And let’s be honest, making her pregnancy public is not just a religious right, it’s a necessity to clear his own family name. Remember all those father figures that traced Joseph back to Abraham? Do you really think that Joseph wants to be the knob in the family tree that ruins the family name? Mary’s misstep doesn’t just ruin her name; it can ruin Joseph’s too.

Again, Joseph is a devout man, and as such, his love for God is greater than his love for Mary (and let’s be honest, in an arranged marriage, how much love does he really have for Mary?). But also, as a devout man, Joseph knows how merciful is God. So, instead of dragging Mary to the center of town and calling her to task, and perhaps in an attempt at protecting his own family name, instead of making her pregnancy public, Joseph decides to dismiss her quietly.

Like Max – Joseph wanted nothing to do with the story. Joseph was scared of being a part of this story, going so far as being prepared to dismiss Mary and leave the story all together.

But for Joseph, the story is interrupted. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins.”

Do you ever notice that angels from God always show up to calm the concerns of those being invited to join in God’s story surrounding Christ? To Mary, to the shepherds, to Joseph – even to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. Anytime we’re concerned for what God is doing, an angel is there to calm our fears.

This is such a God-move. We see this kind of thing happen throughout Jesus’ life – even here before he is born. The teaching story of Christ is, “though you have heard it said ... I say to you ...” Right?! Like with healing on the Sabbath, or touching the leprous man, or with adultery or murder. Here, with Joseph, we find the angel saying, “You have heard it said, you shall stone a woman who becomes unfaithfully pregnant ... but I say to you, take her as your wife.” The

invitation of the angel is not for Joseph to reject the faithful teachings of the past, but to follow a divine leading to a new understanding of faithfulness.

Joseph, like Max, was hesitant to participate in a plan that didn't make sense. Both were looking for an out. Neither wanted to participate in the story. But look what happens ...

Max has led the Grinch back up the mountain with all the food, toys, decorations – even that last can of Who Hash. But Christmas arrives – as it always does – and the Whos begin to sing. The Grinch and Max both realize that the celebration is about something more than just the surface level visual effects that they despised so much. And as the Grinch's heart grows – he literally has a change of heart – Max jumps into action. When the sleigh gets back to the center of town, we see Max tossing gifts out of the bags back to the Whos.

And look how Joseph responds – “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.” There's no longer a hesitancy in Joseph's actions. He steps into the storyline full throttle, leading Mary back to his hometown where they will be registered together, as husband and wife, with the new born son.

This is the power of the birth of Christ. This is why the angel, quoting Isaiah, invites Joseph to name the child. “He shall be called *Immanuel*, which means ‘God with us.’”

*God with us.*

In the midst of the story of the birth of Christ, there is pain, heartache, and these personal struggles that we see in the midst of the story of Joseph. This is not the storyline of a peaceful nativity. It's raw; it's challenging; it's heartbreaking. But this is what it means that God is with us – it means God doesn't shy away from our messiness. In fact, quite the opposite, God enters into the messiness of humanity. God didn't choose some fairy-tale princess to be the mother of Christ; he didn't choose some kingly figure to be the father of Christ; God enters into the world into the tension of the brokenness of humanity, inviting himself into the deepest darkest corners of our lives, to offer the hope, the love, the peace, and the joy of forgiveness and new life.

The angel instructs Joseph, and he gives the name to the child: Jesus. This *is* Immanuel – Jesus *is* God with us. Like Joseph, and like Max, when we are filled with the truth of the season, God with us, we do not shy and try to run *from* the story-line, but we are instead filled with the hope that drives us to claim our part in the story.

This is the invitation of God in the Advent of Christ, that we may be caught by the Spirit who leads us back from running away to claim our part in the work of God in the world. This is the hope of Joseph – that even when we doubt ... even when we want to exercise our religious and culturally appropriate punishments on others ... even when we are right to walk away, God is with us, calling us to see the Lord Christ, given for us to empower us, to forgive us, to invite us to share in the joyful work of God's great love on earth. For the glory of God, God is with us.