

4th Sunday of Advent – Joseph
Matthew 1:18-25

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many of you know that there are two Christmas stories in the Bible, two stories of Jesus' birth. One is in the Gospel according to Luke. That's the one we get every year at our Christmas Eve service, the story of the census and the trip to Jerusalem, of the angels and the shepherds, and the baby Jesus in the manger. The other one is the one I just read from the Gospel according to Matthew. We get that one only once every three years, which is too bad, because it is really an important story of the faith. This story has very little in common with the story from Luke. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are all in both stories. Both stories tell of Mary becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit and not by Joseph. And both tell of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. And that's pretty much it. That's all the two stories have in common. Luke's account focuses almost entirely on Mary. She is the main character there. The angel comes to her, not Joseph, and she gets the speaking part. In Luke, Joseph is almost an afterthought. But in Matthew he gets the starring role in the story of Jesus' birth and it is Mary, by contrast, who recedes into the background.

Both Mary and Joseph, in Luke and Matthew respectively, can be used as models of Christian faith. I'll have more to say about Mary on Christmas Eve. This morning I want us to think about Joseph for a few minutes, and in particular I want us to notice how his story is meant to become, in a sense, our story. Joseph's story begins before our reading starts. The first part of Matthew's first chapter is a genealogy that traces Joseph's ancestry back to Abraham. But there's this small matter that Joseph is not Jesus' father! The whole genealogy reads this way: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob... and so on all the way down to Joseph. But then at the end it says that Joseph was the husband of Mary who bore Jesus. The genealogy stops just short of Jesus! Today's text is the story of how the final step gets made, the final link established. And it only happens because God creates a new possibility where there wasn't one before.

And I'm not talking about the virgin birth. That too was God in action. But *that* action of God is exactly what throws a monkey wrench into the family tree, to mix metaphors. Now I don't think Joseph necessarily knew the details of his genealogy as Matthew laid it out, but I do think that Joseph's plan, like the plan of his ancestors before him, was to take a wife and have children. His plan was to continue the line, whatever that line might be. It's what you did in this time and culture, and Joseph is already well into this plan. He has a wife lined up; they're about to be married. But then suddenly she turns out to be pregnant. Now, our text tells us right from the start that this was the work of the Holy Spirit, just so the reader is in no doubt. But Joseph didn't know that! All he knows is that Mary is pregnant, and he is not the father.

What Matthew tells us next is key: Joseph is righteous. He's a good man. Respectable, honorable, upright. The best sort of person you could imagine. He plans to break things off with Mary, but he doesn't want to "expose her to public disgrace," Matthew tells us. And you have to realize that if he did, Mary would likely have been put to death. That was the punishment for adultery. You know that because you know the story of the woman caught in adultery whom the crowd brings to Jesus ...the one where Jesus has to say, "let the one who is without sin throw the first stone"? Joseph doesn't want that for Mary. But he also doesn't want to marry her any more. Because he's righteous. Because righteous, honorable men don't marry unrighteous, dishonorable women. That is his assumption about Mary when he learns she is pregnant, and now marrying her is out of the question. So however nice you think Joseph is, he is still going to

break off the engagement and abandon Mary and her child. That was the only possible course of action in that culture. It was common sense. It was the righteous thing to do. The “right” thing. Any respectable person would agree.

But what is inconceivable for Joseph, if you’ll pardon the pun – what is impossible for him to consider – God now makes possible. Left to his own devices and following the rules of his culture, Joseph’s righteousness would have done great damage to Mary and her child. But God steps in to create a new possibility, one that Joseph was unable to create for himself. God, through the angel in Joseph’s dream, tells him to not be afraid of the stigma of marrying a woman carrying someone else’s child. “Do not fear what your culture has taught you to fear. Marry this woman and become this child’s father.” That’s maybe a better way to translated what the angel says to Joseph, because that’s what it means for Joseph to name Jesus in this culture. By doing that he becomes his father for all legal and practical purposes.

I don’t think we generally appreciate how difficult that would have been for righteous Joseph to do. But he did it. His own personal plans may have been dashed by this series of events, but by the grace of God he was able to embrace God’s new direction for his life. He does as the angel says, and takes Mary as his wife. The genealogy is complete, in an unforeseen way, and the Holy Family comes into being. And Jesus will follow in his adoptive father’s footsteps in this way: he too will be called to sacrifice for the sake of God’s mission. And he will answer that call for us and for our salvation.

How then does Joseph serve as a model of faith for us? Like Joseph we too live in a culture with its own ideas of right and wrong, a culture in which being right is more important than being kind or merciful, where self-indulgence is valued more than generosity, and individual rights more than the common good. Our culture has made us okay with having others suffer for our benefit. Our whole economy is structured that way, just as one example. We get to have cheap goods and services by paying poverty wages to the workers who provide them for us. We get to have cheap power and convenient transportation at the expense of the environment and future generations. And we lavish attention and esteem on those who store up riches for themselves while children and families in our communities go hungry and homeless. Examples abound. I’m sure you can come up with lots of your own.

What Joseph’s story give us, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas in a culture that has turned it into another occasion for buying things, as we rush to complete our shopping lists, is a reminder that God’s mission in the baby born in Bethlehem runs counter to our culture, just as it ran counter to the culture of Joseph’s time and place. Like Joseph we are called to new possibilities that our culture does not make room for. God’s mission is one of forgiveness and mercy, of compassion and self-sacrifice. God opens that way to us by coming among us as one of us, by enduring the scorn and the brutality of our dog-eat-dog reality that wraps itself in a veil of righteousness, in order to free us from fear and from our self-centeredness, and to open our hearts and minds to the life God created us for and to the world that God loves.

God’s call is not what we would have planned for ourselves. It is so much better than that. So may God grant us the faith of Joseph in these last days of Advent. And as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the same Christ Jesus, our savior and Lord. Amen.