

Joseph's Story – Matthew 1:18-24 – December 4, 2016

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Of the four gospels, only two of them record any information about the birth of Jesus. Luke's gospel focuses on Mary's story. We learn of her relative Elizabeth conceiving a child when she was well past childbearing years. That child would grow up to be John the Baptist. Mary herself was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who told her that she had found favor with God and would give birth to the savior, the one who would bring peace, compassion and justice to his people.

Luke also tells us about the Roman census which necessitated the journey to Bethlehem and the unfortunate fact of Mary having to give birth where the animals were stabled. We also meet the shepherds who are greeted by angels on the night of the birth of Jesus. The angels proclaim the birth as a message of wondrous joy. The shepherds hurry off to Bethlehem in search of this special newborn.

Matthew's gospel is different and his perspective on the nativity takes a different path. Last week we learned about the genealogy of the Messiah, the Anointed One. We learned how the birth of Jesus was all part of God's overall plan of redemption for not only Israel, but also for the world. As a Son of Abraham, Jesus would be faithful and obedient to God. As a Son of David, Jesus would be part of the kingly heritage of Israel, and he would be the leader who would save his people.

But the genealogy also includes the names five women. The stories of the women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba – highlight points in Israel's history where God worked in unconventional ways to bring about the overall plan of salvation. Ending with the name of another woman, Mary, the wife of Joseph, we are alerted that God is about to act again. God is about to act in a very powerful way.

Following the lengthy genealogy, we come to the actual story of the birth of Jesus. And in Matthew's gospel, we see a much different story than what we have in Luke's gospel. We are introduced to a couple who are betrothed – Mary and Joseph. Betrothal is not the same thing as what we call engagement. Betrothal was contractual. Even though the man and woman were not yet living together under the same roof, they were legally considered to be husband and wife. If a man died during a betrothal, the woman would be considered his widow. The only way to end a betrothal was through divorce.

Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, presumably by some other man. This was a scandalous situation, both culturally and morally. Remember in this time and place, women were considered to be little more than property. A bride who was not a virgin was considered to be damaged goods, worth much less than a woman who was a virgin. Furthermore, in a society where family ties meant everything, a child who was fathered by someone outside the family would be in jeopardy of not receiving any future inheritance.

Joseph faced quite the dilemma here. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. That meant he followed the law of God to the letter. And according to the law of God, if a woman was unfaithful to her husband, he had to dismiss her, to divorce her. The harshest consequence for adultery was death by stoning. But in addition to being righteous, Joseph was also a good and

kind man. Thoughts of revenge or retaliation never even entered his mind. Obviously, Joseph cared very much for Mary, because he wouldn't even consider stoning as an option.

Furthermore, he did not want to expose her to public shame and ridicule. That would ruin her and it would ruin her family. He cared too much to allow that to happen. So, he settled for the gentlest option within the law – to privately and quietly divorce her. It was the most practical solution to his problem.

With a heavy heart but at least with a clear mind, Joseph somehow drifted off to sleep, not knowing that another shocking revelation was headed his way. If he thought Mary's pregnancy was earth-shattering, he could not anticipate what was coming next. Joseph was confronted by a second surprise, a heavenly visitation in his dream. An angel came to him while he slept.

In Luke's gospel we learned that the angel Gabriel came to Mary while she was awake and told her that she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her child was to be the Son of God. In Luke's gospel Mary questioned the angel, trying to understand what was happening to her, and in the end she voiced her acceptance of the task.

It's funny though, because throughout the story in Matthew's gospel Joseph was completely silent. We will hear no words from him. What's important here in Matthew's gospel is not so much his words but his actions. We already have been told that Joseph is a righteous man. Following God's law is second nature to him. But like his betrothed Mary, soon he will have a choice to make – follow the law or follow God. Ultimately it is his act of faithfulness to God that will speak more loudly than any words he could utter.

And so, as Joseph slept, an angel of God came to him in a dream. The angel told him to not be afraid to continue on with his original plan to wed Mary. In the dream the angel explained that Mary's pregnancy was part of God's plan, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel then gave him the task of naming the child. He was told to name the child Jesus, which means "God saves," because this child was destined to save the people from their sins.

So, Joseph was faced with yet another surprise, another shock to his system. He had made up his mind. He had planned to follow the law and divorce Mary. No one would fault him for carrying through on those plans. That was the right thing to do according to the law. But then this angel came and messed everything up again.

Now Joseph faced a hard choice. Do I do what God wants me to do, even though it means that I ignore the requirements of the law? Do I do what God wants me to do, even though I will face shame and ridicule from everyone around me? Should I willingly put myself in a position like this? Should I follow God and ignore what is "right" and what is "expected?" Joseph could have said no. He could have turned away from God's request. But Joseph chose the hard road. He chose to accept Mary and, in so doing, to also accept the baby she carried as his very own.

For Joseph, in the end, following God was more important than following the law. His faithfulness was more important than his righteousness. A lot was at stake when God chose this particular

couple to be the parents of the savior of the world. They were ordinary people by worldly standards. Probably would not have stood out in a crowd. Mary was part of a priestly family, and Joseph's lineage went all the way back to King David – so they were both of good stock. But they were regular folks. Joseph was a blue-collar worker, a carpenter. They'd never be rich, but they would survive.

By the standards of this world, Mary and Joseph were unremarkable. But God saw something within them – the spark of faithfulness. Both were necessary pieces in God's plan. Either of them could have said no. But they both said yes and they became part of God's plan to bring salvation to the world. They said yes to Jesus, and in a way, I guess they were the first disciples. They certainly modeled what discipleship to Jesus is all about. Faithfulness. The willingness to trust and follow God, even when things don't seem to add up. The willingness to trust and follow God, even when the world says you're crazy for doing so.

I mentioned earlier that in the story Joseph had spoken no words. His only role in God's salvation story, the story of how God came into the world to be Immanuel, "God with us," was through his actions. He simply did what God told him to do. No arguments, no wavering, simple obedience. He showed trust, he modeled faithfulness. I can imagine that he stood proudly by Mary when the whispering and staring began, he took her to Bethlehem as part of the Roman census, he knelt with apprehension at her side as she delivered her firstborn son, he tenderly cradled the child in his arms before placing him in a manger, he gazed into the face of the incarnate God and softly called his name "Jesus." God saves. Joseph might have been a man of a few words, but his actions spoke volumes.

And herein lies the answer to that burdensome question that I left you with last week. How could Jesus come from the line of David if Mary was not from the line of David, and Joseph was not his biological father? By naming the baby, Joseph is claiming him as his own. Call it an adoption, if you will. Joseph named him and so accepted him as his son and heir. It's quite simple, really.

I'd like to close with an excerpt from a poem written by Presbyterian pastor and writer J. Barrie Shepherd (from *Faces at the Manger*, 1992)

The hardest task
The most difficult role of all:
That of just being there
And Joseph, dearest Joseph, stands for that.
Don't you see?

It is important,
crucially important,
that he stand there by that manger,
as he does,
In all his silent misery
Of doubt, concern, and fear.
Because if Joseph were not there

There might be no place for us,
For those of us at least -
So many - who recognize and know -
That heartache also for our own,
Who share that helpless sense
Of lostness, of impotence
In our own lives, our families, our jobs
In our fearful threatened world this night.
Yes, in Joseph's look of anguish
We find our place;
We discover that we too
Belong beside the manger:
This manger in which are met
God's peace and all our wars and fears....

Let us *be* there,
Simply be there just as Joseph was,
With nothing we can do now,
Nothing we can bring -
It's far too late for that -
Nothing even to be said
Except, 'Behold - be blessed,
Be silent, be at peace.'

"Joseph, son of David,
Do not fear," the angel said.
And Jim and Alice, Fred and Sue,
Bob and Tom and Jean and Betty, too,
The word to you, to all of us
Here at the manger side,
The word is also, "do not fear."
Our God, the Lord and Sovereign,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Time and eternity,
Of life and death and all that is
And shall be,
Has joined us in this moment..."