

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
“Joseph: The Forgotten Man of Christmas”
Matthew 1:18-25

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This evening, I want to talk to you about Joseph- the largely FORGOTTEN man of Christmas. He is the Rodney Dangerfield character of the nativity story- one who never seems to get much respect from scholars OR from preachers. One rarely hears any sermons on him and you'd be hard-pressed to find any reference to him in any of our hymnals or see him prominently depicted in stained-glass windows. In the past, I had tended to regard Joseph as a minor figure in the whole nativity drama. He seemed more of a SPECTATOR at that manger scene, standing off to one side while groups of angels and shepherds and wise men advanced center stage to worship and offer their gifts to the newborn babe. We really know nothing about him other than what Matthew and Luke tell us in their opening chapters and then after Jesus' twelfth birthday, he disappears ALTOGETHER from the gospel record. What's more, we never hear him utter a single word ANYWHERE; he has absolutely no speaking parts. However, in spite of his low profile, I consider him to be one of the greatest role-models of faith and love to be found ANYWHERE in the Bible.

Our text tells us that while Mary was betrothed to Joseph--before a sexual relationship between them had ever developed--she found herself pregnant with the FATHER of this baby being none other than GOD HIMSELF through the Holy Spirit. Thus, our introduction to Joseph is through a terrible dilemma with Mary placed in the difficult position of having to explain how this came about to the man she is currently betrothed to. FIRSTLY, unlike most MODERN marriages, hers was an ARRANGED marriage- an affair that was handled completely by her family; Mary had very little say as to when or to whom she would be married. SECONDLY, she was probably between twelve and fourteen years old, the customary age at which a young girl became betrothed. And THIRDLY, it was common for the man to whom the girl was betrothed to be older, often as much as TWENTY OR THIRTY YEARS older. It can be assumed that this was the case with Joseph as well.

Now a betrothal meant much more than an engagement. In an ENGAGEMENT, a couple was not yet legally married and either party could still break it off at any time without incurring any kind of penalty. A BETROTHAL, on the other hand, was considered to be MORALLY and LEGALLY a marriage even though the wedding ceremony hadn't yet taken place. Before THAT could happen, they first had to wait a period of time, usually about twelve months, during which they were to abstain from any kind of sexual relations. The reasons for this were that this period of abstinence allowed the couple 1) to get better acquainted; 2) it gave the participating families enough time to prepare for the rather elaborate and expensive wedding ceremony; and 3) it also confirmed the bride's chastity. A year-long period of waiting was enough time to determine if the girl was pregnant or not at the time of their betrothal.

However, if infidelity occurred during the betrothal period, one then had grounds to terminate the relationship. Technically, it wasn't considered a divorce because the two hadn't officially wed yet but was more equivalent to an annulment. However, the penalty for violating one's betrothal couldn't have been more severe- the girl would have been deemed an adulteress

and then stoned to death as punishment for her act. Believe it or not, this kind of stern justice STILL goes on in the world. Several years ago, there was an international outcry when a woman in Iran was sentenced to death by stoning after being convicted of adultery. Under Islamic law, adopted by Iran following their 1979 revolution, adultery is the only crime which still carries the penalty of death by stoning.

Thus the dilemma she faces is a serious one. Here you have a young girl who happens to be pregnant (although she claims to have never engaged in sexual relations of any kind) while being betrothed to a man to whom she is obligated to remain pure until the marriage has taken place. How is she going to explain to him or ANYONE ELSE that although she is now pregnant, she is still a virgin and what's more, she has become pregnant by God through the Holy Spirit. Assuming Joseph was neither stupid nor gullible, the question becomes how this upstanding citizen and proper Jew was going to swallow such a crazy story as that.

With Mary, you have a young girl who is both fearful and bewildered with a scarlet letter pinned to her chest and the threat of death hanging over her head. With Joseph, you have someone who possesses a broken heart and shattered dreams. It was obvious that the betrothal had to end but there also had to be CONSEQUENCES for such betrayal- Jewish law DEMANDED it. The result was inevitable- Mary would be publicly shamed before the rest of the village--a punishment that would bring great disgrace upon her family as well, and afterwards she would be led out and executed.

But then we are told something quite extraordinary. Our text says that Joseph, being a just man, was not willing to put her to shame but resolved to divorce her quietly. When it states that Joseph was a "just" or "righteous" man, it is essentially saying that he was utterly devoted to keeping the commandments of God and sought to be as faithful a Jew as he could. But here is where his problem lay. His love of God's law meant that he also had to agree that Mary's execution is just punishment for having violated it. If God's law was to ever be fulfilled, she would have to suffer the ultimate penalty for her crime- death by stoning. Only in this way will the law be satisfied.

But our text ALSO tells us that Joseph is not only "righteous" but a "compassionate" man. He really doesn't want Mary to die. Not willing to put her to shame, he resolves instead to divorce her quietly so no one else will know and she won't have to be shamed or put to death.

Now this is an EXTRAORDINARY gesture on his part. Obviously, he had to have felt betrayed by her. Perhaps he feels that because he is so much older than her, she was REPULSED by him, that she had might have found and fallen in love with a man HALF his age-- someone more virile and handsome than him. For any OTHER Jew, the disappointment and wound to his pride would have been SO deep that he would have wanted nothing less than the full weight of the law to be carried out against her. He would have wanted to see her DIE for all the heartache she had put him through and, in fact, would have even felt justified in throwing the first stone.

But this was not just ANY Jew- it was JOSEPH. Because he is a RIGHTEOUS man, he knows he must terminate the betrothal, but because he is also GRACIOUS and MERCIFUL, he will do it in such a way that is both wise and compassionate. He knows this has been a tragedy all around and it won't serve anyone's interests to compound it by having this young girl

executed. He is resolved that the shame she will have to carry for the rest of her life will be ENOUGH punishment for her. Then he will feel free to get on with his life.

But the story doesn't end THERE. We are told that an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." When he awoke from his sleep, he did just as the angel of the Lord commanded him- he took Mary as his wife and had no sexual relations with her until her son was born, and had him named "Jesus" as he was ALSO instructed.

With Joseph, we not only see a man who is DEVOUT and COMPASSIONATE but someone who is a person of DEEP FAITH, someone willing to trust God despite how painful the circumstances. Where BEFORE, Joseph had intended to end his betrothal to Mary, NOW he resolves to take Mary as his wife and her child as though it was his own. In spite of his fear, he did as he was commanded by staking everything on God's word to him. He FURTHER obeyed the angel by naming the child "Jesus" (meaning "savior") for he would save his people from their sins. Later on, when God tells him to take the mother and baby and flee to Egypt, he obeys STILL AGAIN. Joseph was not afraid to do as he was told because he trusted God and knew that God's plans were ALWAYS best for him.

However, it's important to remember that such values are never formed in a vacuum, that the kind of person Joseph turned out to be in life was a direct result of those devout and loving influences he had grown up with and which helped to shape his life such as his parents and the faith community he was a part of. But then, neither was MY character formed and shaped within a vacuum. For instance, when I look back over my life, I find my love and appreciation for my OWN father—Howard Leslie Wood--grows with each passing year. Though he's been dead now for nearly half a century, dying in April of 1975 at the relatively young age of 57, there isn't a day goes by that I don't wake up and somehow say to myself, "God, how I miss him." He wasn't a perfect dad by any means, but he had a very tender heart and he loved his wife and children as much as any man could.

For thirty years, my father worked as a passenger conductor for the Pennsylvania Railroad. He wasn't an intellectual or academic by any means. In fact, he flunked grade school TWICE- once because he contracted tuberculosis and spent a year in a TB sanitarium, and again, because, as he told me, he was "just plain dumb." The truth, however, was that my father was anything BUT dumb. He was a voracious reader from whom I developed my OWN love for books. He loved words and there would be completed crossword puzzle books left all over the house. Perhaps he's responsible for my addiction to the New York Times crossword puzzle that comes each Sunday in the back of the magazine section. We'd also discuss politics for hours- he a Richard Nixon Republican and I, a George McGovern Democrat. At the time I was just starting college, that ground-breaking television series "All In the Family" had become a public sensation and my father would never miss an episode. When I'd return home from college on weekends, he'd say with mock surprise, "Well if it isn't 'Meathead,' which was, of course, Archie's affectionate moniker for his liberal son-in-law in the series.

My dad was almost twenty years old when he finally graduated from high school but he was bound and determined to get his diploma. It was 1937, the middle of the Great Depression, and he knew that without that piece of sheepskin, it would be all that harder to make a life for himself and his family when he started one. In fact, he was so serious about the merits of

education that when my twin brother and I graduated from high school, his goal was to see the both of us get through college. So he worked two jobs RIGHT UP TO THE DAY HE DIED in order to help pay for our tuitions- he wanted US to have what he himself never could.

My father never lived long enough to see both of us graduate but he did see Christ turn my life around and call me into the ministry and for that, I'll always be thankful to God. Now I see myself more of a chip off his block with every passing year. I'll always remember him as a good, fair, honest, hard-working, and above all, much-loving father, and when you think about it, that's probably about all we can ask out of ANY good "father" or even "MOTHER." I've been a step-father of sorts to Michael, my wife's son now for the past fifteen years, and the one moment I will never forget was one year he left me a Christmas card in which he said he loved me and that I had been more of a father to him than his own BIOLOGICAL father. That may have been the GREATEST Christmas gift I've ever received and certainly if true, it serves as a tribute to my OWN father for providing me with a such a fine example to follow.

I can't help but believe that the kind of person JESUS eventually developed into came about much the same way, in a very SIMILAR process. When I think of those qualities which made Joseph, his step-father, so very special- his RIGHTEOUSNESS, which led him to love God's law and to desire God's will in every situation; his COMPASSION, which tempered his understanding of the law by giving priority to love and mercy over that of judgment and retribution; and his FAITH, which allowed him to trust God and make those difficult decisions you or I would NEVER have made, I now see why Jesus turned out the way that he DID. You see, those were the very same qualities and values that characterized our LORD'S life and enabled HIM to eventually become the savior HE was for US. I think it can be said that without Joseph's influence in his life, it's quite possible there might have been no ministry, no cross, and no resurrection for us to celebrate at Easter time, and we would still be dead in our sins.

Consider how JESUS' life and teachings were shaped by the example and qualities demonstrated by his stepfather. Like Joseph, he TOO grew up in the synagogue and learned the ways of God and love his Law. But ALSO like Joseph, he learned that the Law without mercy and tempered without love could become a cruel instrument that could punish and enslave persons rather than become a means for instructing people in the ways of God. Wasn't this why he preached that PEOPLE must always take priority over rules and regulations, that the Law was not made for man but man was made for the Law? It is quite possible that when Jesus encountered the woman caught in adultery and he refused to condemn her, he had in the back of his mind how Mary, his mother, had almost found herself in a very SIMILAR situation many years earlier. And if Jesus modeled Joseph's RIGHTEOUSNESS and SENSE OF COMPASSION, he no less exemplified his remarkable FAITH. The same openness to God and trust in his word that characterized Joseph's life would characterize our LORD'S life as well, even if his journey would eventually end at the foot of a cross.

But as I close, I have one concluding observation to make. Jesus was despised by the ruling religious establishment because he made God more PERSONAL to everyone. When he taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, he began it with the words, "Our Father, which art in heaven..." When he spoke to the people about God, he gave him the new name "Abba," "Father," or "Daddy." When Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son, it was the FATHER who was the REAL hero of the story, a not-so subtle reference to God himself. I can't help but believe that Jesus' understanding of God as his HEAVENLY FATHER was a direct

consequence of those great lessons in righteousness and compassion and faithful obedience he had received from Joseph, his own EARTHLY FATHER. Because Joseph modeled such divine qualities in his life, Jesus could ascribe that same title of “Father” to GOD- a point beautifully captured by the poet Dorothy Scott Ballard in her poem “The Father”:

*O Joseph, of the holy family least,
A just man art thou called, and all the rest
Of law and virtue in thy homely life
Is left unnamed, to be inferred or guessed.*

*But who can doubt thy warmth of heart, thy grace
Of spirit wise, or who shall think it odd
To hold thee great? When Jesus spoke to heaven,
“My Father” was the name he gave to God.*

May we all be granted not just a fresh appreciation of Joseph, the often “forgotten man of Christmas,” but, like Jesus, may we be so inspired by him that we TOO will strive to emulate that SAME righteousness, that SAME compassion, and that SAME faithful obedience in our OWN lives. Let us pray...

Almighty God, who came to us long ago in the birth of Jesus Christ, be born in us anew today by the power of your Holy Spirit. We offer our lives as home to you and ask for grace and strength to live as your faithful, joyful children always even as Joseph did. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.