

Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First of all, I want to start this sermon with sort of a public service announcement. I do just about every year, and that is, if you're a young person, especially if you're college age, and you have not bought your father anything; do not buy him a billfold. It is the height of irony to buy your father a billfold at Christmas. It just seems wrong to give a dad an empty billfold. He already has one. Trust me. I know.

Speaking of dads, who get no respect, what about Joseph? He is the worst part to play when you're a child in the Christmas play because Joseph just hangs around in the background. All the attention is on Mary and Jesus while Joseph is over there somewhere with the shepherds and the animals off the side, and even the animals get to make some noise. Joseph has no speaking lines. He just stands there by Mary in the shadows.

Do you know, it's a fact that nowhere in any of the Gospels do we have a record of Joseph saying a word? It is just not recorded. It is no wonder that Christian tradition has never quite known what to do with Joseph. He disappears from the Gospels before Jesus is baptized, and is never heard from again. We assume that he has died by the time of the cross because that's where Jesus hands over his mother to John to be cared for, saying, “Behold, your mother.”

Let's pay some attention to Joseph today. He had some difficult decisions to make. You know, Jesus creates a crisis wherever he goes? A crisis literally means a forced choice, a junction where one road must be chosen over another. From the very beginning, even before his birth, Jesus created a crisis in Joseph's life.

The heart of this story is about a righteous man, who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked! His betrothed wife pregnant, he knows not by him, and apparently his trust is betrayed. His name is ruined. His future is collapsed. It is about a righteous man, who surveys a mess in the beginning that has landed at his door, and he has absolutely nothing to do with it. Yet, he decides to believe that God is present in it.

That ought to sound familiar to more than a few of us today. Haven't you had at least a few impossible messes land at your door over the years? Haven't you cried out in moments of prayer and frustration, okay God, I know I'm supposed to do something here. What is it? There is no easy way out of this. There's no way where someone doesn't get hurt. No way for me to get through this without being burned. What do you want, God? What do you want me to do? We've felt that way. I think that is pretty much how Joseph felt.

Weighing and balancing his commitment to God, his love of Mary, his potential humiliation in the community, what to do? What to do?

It reminds me of an old saying that I really can't properly attribute, but I love this saying. It is, “To do what is difficult all one's days, that is faith.”

If Joseph had done what was easy, pregnant Mary would have been at least divorced if not stoned to death. That was the law in its extreme. If Joseph had allowed his apparently confirmed suspicions to work their way into anger and rage, he could have under the cover of law had his beloved Mary publicly humiliated and stoned to death at her father's door. That was allowed. That was done in that day.

You see this was more than an engagement. Joseph and Mary were married more or less. Back then, first you were engaged, and then betrothed, and a betrothal was so binding a covenant that only a divorce or death could end it. When Mary was found to be expecting, and when Joseph found out, and he knew that it was not his child, in that instant, when that was all that he knew, he must have been heartbroken. What man wouldn't be? Joseph was a real man. We don't need spoken words in the story to know how he must have felt. Hurt. Betrayed. Angry.

When a loved one betrays any of us, it strikes us to the core. It may be money or it may be a secret or it may be long-term plans broken or it may be a broken promise or as in this case apparent unfaithfulness. It boils down to trust. The issue is trust. The issue of faith in God is trust. The issue of faith in another person is trust. Without trust there really is no relationship.

To Joseph, it must have seemed that his future plans were over and that his trust had been violated. It was only a matter of how publicly or how quietly he was going to put Mary and his dreams aside. Joseph must have agonized over what to do, and he could have set the wedding a little sooner in hopes that people would lose track of the months, or he could divorce her, or he could have her stoned to death. Being a righteous man and still loving Mary, he didn't think that he could do any of these. I can imagine him all day long in his carpenter shop wrestling with the dilemma and planing boards with a planing knife down to nothing, spending sleepless nights tossing and turning, and pondering Mary's strange news, and thinking how best to resolve the problem.

Finally, he made a decision. We come to this Scripture in Matthew where he has already made a decision that he would quietly divorce her. The way you could do that was in the presence of two witnesses so no harm would come to her. We don't know whether he had yet told Mary of his decision, but he had decided. He felt that it was the most sensible thing to do because he could not, he did not at this time, believe Mary's story. Then, there was a dream! A solution in a dream.

Now, that reminds me. I had a friend when I was at Duke, who would just read all the books about the subject on which he had to write a big paper, and then he would smile,

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go to sleep, and this is the way he told me it happened. He would wake up the next morning, and almost in a dream state, type out his paper! He said his brain just organized it as he slept. That doesn't work for me. I tried doing my taxes that way one year. It doesn't work.

The closest thing I have coming to that, and really this has nothing to do with the sermon, but I do have something close to that. Once I went to sleep just frustrated because we had a brand new toaster oven that would not pop open when the toast got the proper brown. It just wouldn't ever pop open, ever! I went to sleep, and about 4 o'clock in the morning, I dreamed the thing, the little switch was put on upside down at the factory so I got up. I lived upstairs in an apartment at Duke. I got out my tools, and I was fixing it, and the med student, who lived below me, called me because he knew I was up because I was making all that noise. He was wondering what's all the stomping about. I started to tell him that I had this miraculous dream of the repair of the toaster oven. I decided to just say sorry, I won't do that again.

Anyway, Joseph was certainly consumed with his problem, and his faith in God, his love for Mary, his standing in the community, and his fear was humiliation. That's what he was afraid of. It would take an angel in a dream to convince this righteous man what would appear to others to be a crazy thing. As this righteous man, who had the law written in his heart, as a righteous man, he was open to hearing God's word. When we reflect on Mary, we talk about her faithfulness and her obedience and her virtue. All these things also describe Joseph.

There are two other things you may have missed. If you remember in the Old Testament, there is another character called Joseph with the coat of many colors, and didn't his ability to interpret dreams for Pharaoh, dreams, play a huge part in his rise to fame and the rescue of his family. That's one thing. Another thing easily missed in the Old Testament, when a prophet in the Old Testament got a word from God to speak, it was said over and over that the Holy Spirit was upon him, and he spoke thus and so. Then the Holy Spirit would leave, and it would say he prophesied no more. Here we have a child Jesus, who was not mere man, who had a bit of the Holy Spirit for a short time. In a few words, we have a child who was conceived from the beginning a unique mesh of humanity and the Holy Spirit, bound together for life, God in flesh.

And so Joseph was told not to fear humiliation. This child would be greater than any prophet and embody the fullness of God in a permanent way in a body of flesh. Even so, it would cost Joseph. Scripture has some veiled references especially in the Gospel of John about wagging tongues and gossipy rumors that lasted all the way into Jesus' adulthood. There was a time in Chapter 8 where the Pharisees were saying, “We have Abraham as our father.” They said to Jesus, “We are not born of fornication,” looking at him with a jaded eye. “We know who our father is,” looking at him with a jaded eye. They implied that Jesus' fatherhood was in question.

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If that was going on in Jesus' adult lifetime, Joseph had to put up with that all during the early years, you know. After the dream, which Joseph obeyed, is a word from God, and after hearing that Mary was carrying a child that was filled with the Holy Spirit, after Joseph's decision to believe and trust God and trust Mary, he disappears! What do we learn from Joseph? Isn't he a model man of faith? Isn't he a model husband, who loves and cares even when he believes that there is nothing left? He was afraid, afraid to enter into a deeper relationship with her.

You know that also should ring a little recognition in our head. We all seem to be afraid of entering into deeper relationships. We have a lot of acquaintances, but very few really deep friends, who know us inside out. For that matter, I've met a lot of folks, who are angry with God in similar ways because their life just hasn't turned out the way they planned, and so they have only a superficial relationship with God, resenting the way their life has turned out.

Well, think of Joseph! God sometimes uses people mightily to play vital roles, but just hidden in the background, and that great cost, vital but costly, in the background. Roles that we would never have chosen. Roles where the only choice is to trust God because on our own we just don't have the energy and we don't have the wisdom. We were made for more than superficial relationships. Part of the Gospel message is that we can get past disappointments and betrayals and violated trust, and we can begin again! The gift of the Gospel is hope of new life here and now, and hope of life forever with God.

Now, it's Christmas almost, and you may wonder why I'm dealing so much with Joseph. Well, because trust is the essence of faith and because relationships broken and restored are the essence of the Gospel, because the hope of Christmas is the hope of new life, of peace where there has been a war, where there has been hatred. We must get passed our fear, our fear of being made a fool of, our fear of deeper relationships because close enough to hug is, I know, close enough to hurt. We also must get passed the increasing bias against the Christian faith, the bias that says you are below average intelligence if you believe that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of his cross. You must get passed the fear of being branded foolish. If you truly believe that the babe in the manger was more than just another baby. The scandal of the incarnation offered the learned and religious of Jesus' day, it offended them greatly. We've grown up believing this, but it has begun to cost more and more to profess it and to believe that God was indeed with us in Jesus Christ.

Joseph got some good news in his dream, good news that he did not have to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. It was not as he feared. She had not betrayed him. She had not violated his trust, and there was no need for shame. There was no need for divorce. The couple's love was renewed and restored, and began again because Joseph trusted God, and had never stopped loving Mary. Notice how the dream gave Joseph a third option that he didn't have before. It opened up a door that didn't exist. Because he accepted the dream as God's Word, he did not need to harm Mary nor divorce her quietly. The dream made possible what until then would not have been possible.

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Another thing, Dietrich Von Hoffer, in his book Ethics, described this new kind of righteousness as going beyond an anxious concern for impeccable behavior to a willingness to suffer ridicule for another. Going beyond the righteous concern for impeccable behavior and how you look in front of other people, going beyond that to a willingness to suffer ridicule for another person. Joseph was willing to suffer ridicule for Mary, and didn't Jesus on the cross in an ultimate way show that kind of love? A willingness to suffer ridicule for us all.

One of the often-ignored parts of the Christmas miracle is that Joseph stayed. He listened to God's messenger. He took the dream to heart. Joseph, who was overwhelmed by hurt and fear and had made his mind up to go, instead gave himself over to God's will and to trust and to faith. In a different way, and under completely different circumstances, my prayer is that you receive the same gift. If you are overwhelmed by hurt and fear, listen to this messenger of God, who has traveled in some of these same valleys and found hope and restoration, and find that still, small voice. My hope for you is that you find the voice of God saying, “It is not over.” It does not always have to be embittered. It does not always have to be dark. It does not always have to be frightening. I will come to you where you are. There is hope. There will be peace. There is still light in whatever darkness you dwell. I will send my light. It's not over. I will come to you. There is hope. There can be peace. I have sent my light into the darkness of this world, and the darkness cannot – the Gospel of John says – the darkness cannot overcome it.

Have you heard that whisper? Do not fear. God is here. It may not be the life you had planned, but God may be born into your life as well, if you permit it. Remember Joseph. Remember God works in a crisis, and remember what Christmas means. God heals. God restores. God can make all things new. Thanks be to God. Amen.