

## **Sermon: Joseph was a Righteous Man**

Year A, Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1:18-25, Isaiah 11:1-10

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At all times of the year, I am a list girl. I am so Martha. At this time of the year, my lists have lists. And yet I am still afraid of forgetting something. Because I won't forget a big thing. I'll forget a little thing, that I can normally take care of. So I will have a lovely sermon for this morning, but I'll preach it wearing either my prom dress or my nightgown because I'm out of clean clothes. So there's this constant fear that I can't fix what I broke. And somehow that kind fear dials up the volume of all the other fears: for my sister's family in Hong Kong, for the economy, for the growing health of this church, for the divisions in our political system, for my credit card bills after Christmas. I spend this time of year surrounded by fears I have to actively work to ignore.

Isaiah talk about fear in another sense. *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD* (Isaiah 11:1-2). Fear of the Lord does mean fear in the sense of being frightened. But it also means being in awe of something, humbled by it, overwhelmed by it. When I saw Niagara Falls, some part of my evolutionary brain from way back on the Serengeti said, "Whoa. This thing is bigger than me." I feared Niagara Falls.

Advent is a time of preparation. What preparations are our fears keeping us from? What are the fears we're ignoring? What are the fears that are keeping us back from something that would fill our lives with awe? What fears are keeping us off of God's holy mountain? What fears can we let go of so that, as Isaiah says, *His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; ... Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins* (Isaiah 11:3-5). Righteousness, being in right relationship with God, seems to be key to the operation, so what fears are keeping us from getting into right relationship with God?

[pause]

In last week's reading, we started with *genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham* (Matthew 1:1). Starting with Abraham, we traced Jesus' ancestors, following the line down to *Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born* (Matthew 1:16). I argued that by looking at the specific lives of all those people, we could see that Jesus summarized the entire history of Israel, from the high points of David to the low points of exile to Babylon and all the parts in between.

In this week's reading from Matthew, we get told that we're going to hear about the birth of Jesus (Matthew's using the word "genesis" again, pointing to the genealogy we just finished and then pointing back to the creation of the world). But really what we hear about is Joseph and what happened before Jesus was born.

Jewish marriage rituals were confusing to outsiders then and now. Marriage happened in two steps.<sup>1</sup> First the couple got betrothed. Then the girl, and she usually was a girl 13 or 14, usually not having entered puberty, would return to her parents' house to live for another year. Once you were betrothed, the relationship could only be ended by divorce. If the man, and he usually was a man in his late teens or early 20s, died during this year of betrothal, then the girl was considered a widow.<sup>2</sup> At the end of year, the girl went to live with her husband and what we would consider the wedding would take place. But once they were betrothed, there wasn't supposed to be any activity that led to babies until the year was up.

Now, we know that Mary was *with child from the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 1:18) because Matthew told us. But Joseph does not. Joseph is a *righteous man* (Matthew 1:19), he in right relationship with God. So that means whatever his feelings for Mary, he needs to follow God's law which says that women caught in adultery during this year period need to be stoned to death.<sup>3</sup> Joseph is a righteous man, he's in right relationship with God, so he knows that God's law is for the salvation of God's people. So rather than thumping on his Bible and shouting "thems the rules," he knows there is a part of the law that recognizes that sometimes these babies that show up during this year were not the result of any choice by the young woman. There's a public trial and the community determines that the young woman had been assaulted.<sup>4</sup> Joseph is a righteous man, he's in right relationship with God, and there's no way a public trial is going to contribute to Mary's salvation, so Joseph decides to quietly divorce her. Joseph has to do something because a righteous man does what he has to do to maintain his relationship with God by following God's rules. But he has to follow the intention of God's rules, not just the letter of the law. Joseph takes his action. He makes his call.

No sooner does he make the call, then an angel shows up in a dream and says to him, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" (Matthew 1:20-21) The angel's appearance changes everything. There is no adultery, there's no assault. There is a baby. That Joseph knows he had nothing to do with. But God did. And Joseph is a righteous man.

So he brings her into his home. And he names the baby. That means the baby is legally his.<sup>5</sup> Not adopted, where everyone knows there's not a biological connection. From the outside, Jesus is as much Joseph's son as John was Zechariah's when we read that story a couple of weeks ago. More than that, no matter what Joseph and Mary and the angel know, from the outside it looks like only one thing. Joseph couldn't wait. Joseph couldn't follow God's rules that say you wait for the year of the betrothal. Joseph is going to put up with all the rude jokes, and knowing looks and "tsk, tsk"s of the community. As far as he knows, he going to put up with them for the rest of his life. And if he or Mary ever try to explain what really happened, they're probably not going to be believed. They're going to be cut out of the community they need, literally, to keep them alive.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979), 123.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, "The Annunciation of Joseph (Matt 1:18-25)." *Worship* 61, no. 6 (1987), 486.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, "Annunciation", 486.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 139.

A quiet divorce is still an option. The quality of Joseph's life is going to be much higher if he just divorces Mary. But Joseph is a righteous man, he's in right relationship with God. And when an angel of the Lord shows up and tells you what to do, you do it. Because this God of Israel is not really one for following the rules. This God of Israel uses second and third and fourth sons to change human history. This God of Israel uses the sons that the rest of humanity dismisses as back up plans should something happen to son number one. This God of Israel uses women with irregular marriages who are creative and determined that God's plan be brought to fruition. This God of Israel gives us rules so we don't have to come up with our own crazy steps to remain in right relationship with God and with each other. But this God of Israel tells us that the rules are there to help us love God and love each other and we should make sure we follow the intention of the Law, not just the letter. This God of Israel's love is so great that nothing can contain it, not even God's own laws. And when it is time to send the Messiah, to send the son of David and the son of Abraham, then the God of Israel swings into action.

As we saw in the story of Zechariah and baby John who would grow up to be John the Baptist, traditionally, the first born son is named after his dad. But like Zechariah, Joseph has instructions from an angel to break with tradition. Joseph calls him "Jesus" which is a variant of "Joshua" which means "God saves."<sup>6</sup> You remember that Moses led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness, to the River Jordan. But he wasn't allowed to cross into the Promised Land. Joshua was the one who did that.

Remember that Matthew is writing for a community that is part Jewish and part Gentile. He could certainly have explained what "Joshua" meant the way I did, by telling the end of the Exodus story. But he says that the baby was supposed to be called *Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). This is so much bigger than bringing a group of people to their homeland. Joshua's work was one and done. Saving us from our sins – that's 24/7 until the end of time. And that salvation is not limited to one nation, but to all the people who chose to accept Jesus, from every nation.

Salvation from sins, forgiveness of sins is the declaration of a new future.<sup>7</sup> It's not resignation that this is the best we can do and we might as well stop beating ourselves up for being such a mess. Forgiveness breaks the simple link between cause and effect, so our previous failures are no longer in control of our future.<sup>8</sup> Instead, our future is in the hands of One who can actually effect a new condition.<sup>9</sup> This is who Jesus is. He is the one who offers us this salvation from sin, from all the calls we made in the past that didn't turn out so well.

All this Joseph gave us because he was a righteous man. I know we hear a lot about Mary and well we should. But in Matthew's birth narrative, we see a man actively confronting his fears, actively taking steps that don't make his life easier because he wants to keep in right relationship with God. Not by checking boxes and crossing stuff off lists. But by really looking at how he can best love God and love his neighbor. If he is going to be seen as someone who can't follow the rules, well, God knows the truth. If he going to say that this child who he knows he had nothing to do with is his, well, God knows the truth. In both Matthew and Luke, Joseph disappears from Jesus' story once Jesus is born. In a couple of weeks, we'll look at the part of

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<sup>6</sup> Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, "Matthew 1:18-25." *Interpretation* 46, no. 4 (1992), 394.

<sup>7</sup> James Arne Nestingen, "The Matthean Advent Gospels." *Word & World* 12, no. 4 (1992), 411.

<sup>8</sup> Nestingen, 411.

<sup>9</sup> Nestingen, 411.

the story where the Holy Family flees into Egypt. But before we leave this man who was more than willing to turn his life upside down to remain in right relationship with God, I want to point out one detail that I found deeply touching.

Just as Joseph had decided to quietly divorce Mary, in order to follow God's laws, the angel appears and says, *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife* (Matthew 1:20). This is the only place in the New Testament where someone other than Jesus is given the title of Son of David.<sup>10</sup> Yes, we are telling the story of the birth of Jesus the Christ. But we are also telling the story of Joseph, son of David, who set aside his fears in order to act on his delight in the fear of the LORD. Righteousness was the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. We can follow Jesus. And we can be righteous people and follow Joseph too.

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 138.