

Supporting Roles: Joseph, Making Choices

Matthew 1:18-25

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Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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Ready or not, here comes Christmas. It's only two days away.

We've been preparing. For the past three Sundays we have looked more closely at the cast of characters surrounding Jesus' birth. We subjected ourselves to that wild man – John the Baptist, who fumed about God's judgment...and God's love. We sat with those ordinary

shepherds who were watching their flocks by night. We watched Mary receive the news from the angel Gabriel and then listened as Mary sang her song.

We've been preparing. We've collected presents for the Christmas Village Toy store. We've made Room at the Inn by opening our church's doors on Monday and Tuesday nights to our homeless neighbors. The bell choir and youth choir and adult choir have been practicing up a storm getting ready for the big night.

Only a few more things to do before we welcome the Christ child. Wrap a few more presents. Get a rush delivery from Amazon.com. Confirm the order for the holiday meal. Oh, and, this Sunday, add Joseph to the nativity scene.

Poor Joseph. Of all the characters in the Christmas story, surely Joseph is the most neglected. Just think about the Christmas pageants you have seen in your life. The shepherds and the angels make their impression early – with their Glorias and excited arrivals at the manger. The wise men always look splendid in their regal outfits, carrying gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. All eyes are on Mary as she carries the baby Jesus in her arms. Even the Inn Keeper gets in on the action – with her dramatic declaration that there is no room for the young couple to stay the night.

But Joseph? Joseph just stands there like a bump on a log. You don't need a shred of acting experience to play the part. All you need to do is put on a bathrobe and be quiet. Just follow Mary. Just don't get in the way of the other characters in the story.

I feel for Joseph. Maybe the reason he never has any lines is because he is still trying to wrap his mind around the bombshell that Mary dropped about her miraculous pregnancy. Maybe he is still trying to understand what it meant for that angel to show up in his dreams.

They say that – for fathers – it takes a little longer to bond with their new babies. Now imagine if the baby is not actually yours – but the Son of God.

I can see Joseph standing by that manger, looking down at the helpless, dependent, fragile little boy, and thinking to himself, "am I ready for this? Can I give of myself to this child, providing for him, protecting him, loving him as my own?"

Of course, the answer is yes. We know that because Joseph was there, standing by Mary's side – beside this woman who was found to be pregnant before they were married.

Indeed, if it weren't for Joseph – we wouldn't have Christmas.

He was a necessary part of God's plan for the raising of this child – this Jesus – this Emmanuel – who would become the savior the world was waiting for.

Joseph's manger-side journey was a complicated one. By all accounts, he shouldn't have been there. If he had done what was expected of him, he would have travelled to Bethlehem alone in order to be registered, not alongside his fiancée, Mary.

The news of Mary's pregnancy left Joseph in a tough spot. In Joseph's time, engagement was much different than it is today. In Joseph's time, engagement was a binding and legal arrangement; legal under the Roman law, as well as the Jewish law. Mary's pregnancy by someone other than Joseph was more than an inconvenience, it was a sign of adultery.

So what was Joseph to do? What must have been going through Joseph's head when he heard Mary's news? What was Joseph to do?

The preacher Fred Craddock suggests that Joseph had a couple choices. Joseph could go out and get the opinion of folks around town. It's an option. Walk in the barber-shop, ask them their opinion. He could update his status on Facebook and see what advice his friends might have. He could ask his prayer partners at the synagogue what they thought was right.

Seeing that this might not be the best course of action, maybe Joseph could consult the Bible and see what it said. That would be a good idea – just find out what it said in the Bible about his situation. Lots of people did it – consulted the Bible to find answers to their questions.

Well, here is what the Bible says. It's right there in the Torah. Deuteronomy, chapter 22, verses 23 and 24. The Bible says that if a woman, a virgin, engaged to be married, is found to be pregnant by another man that woman is to be stoned to death.¹

This just wouldn't do for Joseph – and Joseph knew it wouldn't do for God, either.

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. That is the reason he gives for Joseph's decision to not do what was expected of him; to not treat Mary harshly; but, instead, to protect Mary by "dismissing her quietly" so as to avoid public disgrace.

This decision might spare Mary from public disgrace, but it would subject Joseph to humiliation. Joseph would be thought of as weak. He would be judged as one who did not uphold the law. He risked being shunned by his community – damaging his family's name

¹ Craddock, Fred, *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001) pp 1-6.. Dr. Craddock's interpretation of this text informs much of my sermon – giving it shape and sparking my imagination. It's well worth a read!

and reputation. All because he chose to go a different way than what was plainly evident in the Bible.

But the gospel writer Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. He was a faithful man. Joseph read his Bible, he knew his Bible, and he trusted the God whose story the Bible told. In his heart, he knew that Mary did not deserve the condemnation a literal reading of the Bible proscribed, so he chose to go a different way. Not only that, he chose to read his Bible in a different way. He chose to interpret the Bible through the lens of the goodness and love of God.

Putting it plainly, Craddock describes Joseph as the first person in the New Testament to learn how to read the Bible.

Joseph discovered what is still true today, that if, in reading the Bible, we find warrant to demean, disgrace, humiliate, exclude, objectify, or hurt the very people God loves – then we aren't reading the Bible the right way. Joseph knew this – so he gathered himself and he acted.

Once Joseph made his decision to protect Mary – based on a faithful and grace-filled reading of the Bible – God did the rest. One of those charismatic angels appeared to tell Joseph that if he had come this far in his care and compassion toward Mary, why not go all the way? Why not keep up his commitment to this woman – and marry her – and accept this child as his own? Why not name him – and raise him – into the person that God intended him to be: Emmanuel, God is with us. The One who would save the people from their sins? Why not?

And so he did. He stayed with Mary. He shouldered the burden of public pressure to do what was expected of him. He resisted a popular, and easy, interpretation of the Bible – deciding instead to read his Bible through the spectacles of God's grace.

Joseph stood by the manger that Christmas night, maybe a little shell-shocked, maybe a little overwhelmed, but committed and very much a husband and a father to young woman and infant child who were huddled close.

We don't hear a lot more about Joseph after this in Matthew's gospel. He fades to the background almost as quickly as he comes into view. The rest of the story is, appropriately, about Jesus – about how he came to save his people from their sins; about how he showed and shared the grace that God poured out on the world through his life, death and resurrection.

But I have to think that in between the time of the manger and when we meet Jesus as an adult, going about his ministry – I have to think that Joseph taught Jesus a thing or two about how his Bible. About how to read it; how to interpret it.

Jesus was a Bible-teacher, after all. His followers called him “Rabbi.” For much of his ministry, he interpreted...even re-interpreted...the world through a different kind of lens – reading the scripture through the spectacles of God’s grace.

So I have to think that when Jesus was teaching his followers that it was okay to heal on the Sabbath;

that it was okay to sit at table with known sinners;

that it was okay to touch people who were considered unclean;

that those without sin should cast the first stone;

I have to think that when Jesus was using the scriptures to teach these things, he was – at least in part – shaped by his earthy father who learned to read the Bible that way years before.

It is almost Christmas. It’s only two days away.

I, for one, am grateful that Joseph is around to help us get ready. Grateful that Joseph - and others like him - can prepare us to receive the good news of salvation that comes through the most unlikely of persons and the most unlikely of circumstances.

By way of people like unwed, teenage, pregnant mothers.

By way of those who society urges us to cast out, or distance ourselves from, or ignore.

By way of circumstances we would never expect God to use, were we not willing to filter God’s word through the prism of God’s love.

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