

## **We Can Choose a Better Way**

Sermon 163 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 11, 2022

Matthew 1:18-25

Last week we read the story of Mary's visit from the angel announcing the news of her miraculous pregnancy. We considered how afraid she must have been in the face of this visit and this news and we were inspired by her courage to pause, ponder, and perhaps even rest before responding to this divine interruption in her life.

Today we shift our attention to Joseph - whose life was also interrupted by this news. While so much of the Gospel narrative centers around male characters and their stories, the stories of Advent prominently feature women. Mary and Elizabeth carry them with their pregnancies, their songs, their courage, and their faith while Zechariah and Joseph play secondary roles.

We don't know a whole lot about Joseph, except that he was important. The long genealogy that consumes Matthew's first chapter leads us straight to him, even though he is not the biological father of Jesus. So the fact that his name is the penultimate in the list of all the generations leading up to Jesus has to mean something. Right?

Scholars disagree about how long Joseph lived and how present he was in Jesus' life. We know he was there in the beginning as today's reading would remind us. We know he was a carpenter by trade and that he taught Jesus the same skill (Mark 6:3). We know he lived long enough to father siblings that grew up with Jesus.

But then he sort of vanishes into the background and is absent in some pretty critical moments, like when Mary is alone, except for the other women who linger with her at the cross until the very last moment.

Even though Joseph does not really play a major role in the larger scope of the Gospels, his place here at the beginning is critical. Perhaps it is for this reason that he is spotlighted in every nativity. When we unpack our boxes of Christmas decorations, and we unwrap the various artistic renderings of Joseph, we know he was important to the story and so we imagine who he was, what he was like and how he navigated his unique and peculiar calling.

Matthew tells us the most about Joseph. According to this Gospel, Joseph was a righteous man, and was considerate of Mary's precarious situation. Which, I've got to say, in a world where women were traded as property and marriage arrangements were really business deals more than commitments of love, even considering Mary, and her story of immaculate conception, speaks to his character.

It is common for us to consider Mary's perspective, and all that she had on the line in this situation but to be fair - in his context, Joseph had an awful lot to lose here too. In his culture, built on patriarchy, purity, honor and shame, Joseph's reputation was also on the line.

What would it mean for him that the whole world knew the expected baby his fiancé carried was not his? Would it make him less of a man for believing what Mary said and staying by her side? What would he lose in addition to his reputation? Would he be able to earn a living and support his family or would everyone boycott his business for fear of shame by association? And even without the pregnancy or fathering the baby that wasn't biologically his, what would people think of a man who went along with a plan that came from his wife, an angel, and a dream? He and his entire family (by association) would be the talk of the town!

Surely the best thing for Joseph and his family was to distance themselves completely from this dishonorable situation... To let Mary and her family take the blame and shame, to let them deal with the consequences of her - or rather, God's -actions.

Joseph didn't have to stick around and deal with the situation, he could have publicly dissolved the arrangement, walking away from it all... washing his hands of the situation and moving on with his life. Everyone would have understood. Joseph could have started over with his reputation (for the most part) in tact.

But what if that dream was really true? And Mary... What if she was right?

It is nearly impossible for us to imagine ourselves in this situation, much less to know what we would do if faced with a decision like this... With one option to stay in good relationship with the church and society and the other

option to risk everything following God's plan - one revealed by angels and proclaimed through the voice of a woman (no less)!

*Have you ever faced a decision like this?*

Considering all the options, Joseph comes up with his own plan, one he thinks to be the best compromise: dismiss Mary quietly. But just as soon as his mind is made up his plans are interrupted by a dream in which an angel appears and says those familiar and prophetic words: *Do not be afraid.*

"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Just like that Mary's story was corroborated by the angel in the dream and Joseph knew that his best plan - righteous as it may have seemed at the time - was not God's plan. And so he woke up and chose the better way, doing just as the angel commanded: He took Mary as his wife sharing in her shame... AND HER delight... Because together, they became parents to the Savior of the World.

Christian history remembers both Mary and Joseph with some very special, theological names. Mary is called *Theo-tokos*, Greek for God-bearer; and Joseph is called *Domini Nutritor*, Latin for the male version of "wet nurse." Who could ever have imagined? It's funny, you know, how often we reflect on these infancy narratives and try to imagine ourselves in Mary's place. What would we do if God chose us to carry and birth the savior of the world?!

Yet today's Gospel provides a little twist as it reminds us of Joseph too, a young man, engaged to be married, and with his whole life in front of him. Everything he had been working toward was interrupted with this divine intervention.

*(This is where I think the Gospel might offer some good news for us today...)* Think about it... How many times have our lives been interrupted by forces outside of our control? How many times have our best laid plans fallen apart because the economy shifts or a child gets sick or a loved one has a fall or things just didn't go as anticipated.

Even when our plans are righteous, compassionate, and smart... Even when they seem like the best possible compromise - like Joseph's plan to dismiss Mary quietly - isn't it possible that even then, our plans could be limited or wrong ... because God might have something else in mind?

Almost 12 years ago Justin and I were going to Vegas for our honeymoon. So much to do, right? We rented a Jeep, drove out to Hoover Dam, and tried to see the Grand Canyon but we kept hitting roadblocks. We were having so much fun driving around though, that we decided to drive to California and see the Sequoias in Sequoia National Park. We carefully mapped our route, left Vegas, and drove west through Death Valley National Park (the best French fries!, btw). We made it to Bakersfield which was our planned stop. Now... we had tickets for a show in Vegas late the next night so we had to stick to the plan if we were going to make it work.

We woke up really early, and drove toward Sequoia. We saw some BEAUTIFUL scenery along the way as the fog lifted off the mountains. When we got to the park entrance, the Ranger wouldn't let us in!!!! We would have to have snow chains for the tires. We sat there for a minute thinking about what to do. Since we were young, and poor, and in a pinch, we decided not to take on that additional time or expense of snow tires. We felt that the journey had been worth it already... so we mapped a new course, taking a southern route back to Vegas. Driving through Joshua Tree National Park and the Mojave National Preserve, we went down dirt roads and into desolate places that were totally unlike anything I'd ever seen growing up on the East Coast.

We didn't see what we had planned to see. That gate was literally closed right in front of us. But because we were rerouted, we found unparalleled beauty and delight met us all along the way. This epic road trip is one that Justin and I will remember forever. Some of our favorite pictures hold memories of the two of us standing next to that rented Jeep, pulled off on the side of some dusty desert road in the middle of nowhere - stops we made just to pause and take in the desolate beauty of God's creation.

We keep these favorite pictures on the night table and dresser in our room as a reminder that even our best plans can be interrupted; and that those interruptions may seem inconvenient and sad and all that... but if we are

open to it, we might find that God will meet us along the *new* path with unprecedented & unimaginable joy.

What will it take for us to stop forging ahead with our own righteous plans? Will it take more than a prayer, a vision, a dream, or maybe even an Angel who comes with a hand out and a palm in our faces saying: Stop! I know it seems hard to imagine, I know it isn't what you thought, but God has another way in mind... What will it take for *us* to welcome those divine deviations with enough faith and courage to take the new path forward?

I guess this is the kind of thing we won't know until the choice is right in front of us. *Maybe the choice already is right in front of us?* Which path will we choose?

These pictures tell a story, that lives in a long tradition of stories just like Joseph's! They all remind us that God's ways often DO come about through divine redirection.

So often, they first appear like a slammed door, a dashed dream, a broken heart, a barricade blocking the path we were certain we needed to be on... a sudden ending to a righteous road and an inconvenient call to redirect our course. These stories remind us of the *good news* and give us hope that there is a better way, and THAT gives us the courage to choose the new paths God is laying out before us.

So what do you say?

What will it take for you, for me, for *us* to hear the call in a dream, an angel, or even a marginalized voice saying: Do not fear... for this way is conceived by the Holy Spirit.