

“DO THE RIGHT THING”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Romans 8:22-28

Matthew 1:18-24

It was, no doubt, the worst day of his life. Joseph, the carpenter, had visited with his betrothed, Mary, and probably thought it would be another chance to talk about the plans that lay ahead for them – plans for their covenant ceremony, plans for their home together, plans for their life together. Up until that point, things had run along smoothly. After getting matched by their families, they became betrothed, and slowly, but surely, their future was unfolding, and it was all good, and all systems were go.

And then, out of the blue, came THE CONVERSATION. The one where Mary told him she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. The one that shook him to his core. The one that changed absolutely everything for him. The one that broke his heart.

Obviously, he knew the child wasn't his, and clearly, at that point he didn't believe what Mary said about it being by the Holy Spirit. Or else he wouldn't have struggled with what to do.

At that point, all Joseph could hear, in his pain, was that she was pregnant, and it wasn't his child. Suddenly, everything he thought he knew about his betrothed seemed to be a lie. And now, he had a decision to make.

Actually, it wasn't, on paper, a very difficult decision to make, because religious law was very clear. A woman caught in adultery was to be put to death. So Joseph could just walk away, and let the law take over.

In spite of the heartbreaking pain he was suffering, in spite of the devastating loss he felt, and probably, in spite of the anger he must have felt by Mary's apparent betrayal, yet, the scripture says, Joseph was a righteous man – and while he was deeply hurt, he also was compassionate, and didn't want Mary to suffer that cruel fate.

The great preacher and professor Fred Craddock wrote this about Joseph: “Joseph is a good man, and he rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time. He loves his Bible and he knows his Bible and bless his heart for it.

But he reads his Bible through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of a God who is loving and kind. Therefore, he says, ‘I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her.’

Craddock continues, “Where does it say that, Joseph? In your Bible? I’ll tell you where it says that. It says that in the very nature and character of God.” (Fred Craddock, *Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 5)

Mary’s life was literally in Joseph’s hands. His choice would mean life or death for her. Thanks be to God, Joseph made his choice looking through the lens of the character and nature of a God who is loving and kind.

And so, as Pastor Adam Hamilton noted in his book *The Journey*, Joseph began to develop a plan to break off the engagement, formally and legally, but to do it without explaining why.

He planned to divorce Mary quietly, and he knew what would happen then. That people would eventually realize she was pregnant, put two and two together, figure that Mary and Joseph had slept with one another, that the child was, in fact, his, but he had walked away – and, as a result, as Hamilton said, “the shame would be his, not Mary’s. Mary’s life would be spared.” (Adam Hamilton, *The Journey*, p. 44)

So as the day started to turn into night, on this, the worst day of his life, that was what Joseph was going to do – he was going to quietly break their engagement and walk away. Having settled that in his mind, he finally turned to the solace of his bed for hopefully, some blessed rest.

Oh, the night was blessed all right, but it wasn’t with rest. Instead, just like Mary, Joseph had a visit from an angel of the Lord, who reassured him that indeed, Mary had been telling him the truth. This child was of God through the Holy Spirit. This child would save the world, and this child needed Joseph to be his father and to name him Jesus.

There’s a wonderful preacher by the name of Alyce McKenzie, who wrote of this night in Joseph’s life, and she described it as “the second birth” story of the Nativity. Because she said, Joseph’s story is “the birth of a father for the Son of God. In his sleeping state, Joseph allowed God to speak to the depths of his heart and to offer a resolution to his dilemma that his human reason had failed to discern.”

And she goes on to describe so beautifully the conversation the angel had with Joseph in this way:

“On this night, an angel hovered near, whispering a message from God into Joseph’s sleeping ear. The angel interrupted the nightmare visions of accusation and estrangement that played in the theater of Joseph’s dreams. The angel replaced them with a manger scene and visions of a boy growing and becoming strong.”

“Here,’ whispered the angel, ‘is the key that unlocks your dilemma. Believe her unbelievable story. Marry her, and become the father of God’s child. He will need a father to be accepted by others as he grows to manhood. He will need, not just any father, but a father like you, capable of nurturing him, and giving him a name. Immanuel – God with us.”

“He will need a father like you to teach him to take risks like the one you are about to take, for he will be tempted not to take them. He will need a father like you to teach him to withstand the disapproval of others, as you will soon have to withstand it. He will need a father like you to teach him what to do in situations like this one, when all hope seems lost and only pain remains; to model how to believe the unbelievable good news and to walk ahead in faith. If you do not walk the hard road to Bethlehem, who will teach him how to climb the cruel hill to Calvary?” (On-line, Alyce McKenzie, *The Fear of Betrayal: Advent Reflections on Matthew 1:18-25*)

Oh my goodness, she portrays so beautifully that life-changing, new birth conversation between the angel and Joseph. And change life it did, because Joseph awoke from that dream, and did the right thing. He stayed with Mary, he became her husband, he made a home with her, he traveled with her to Bethlehem, stayed by her side as she labored to give birth, cradled the newborn child in his arms and called him “Jesus.”

And then when they finally got back home, they settled into a routine, and Joseph was his father, in every sense of that word. He watched over him, provided for him, guided him, taught him, encouraged him. How do we know that? Well, the evidence is there in Jesus’ later life, in his ministry particularly.

When Jesus told the crowds about the amazing love and grace shown by the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son – a love that forgave a wayward son and ached over the stubbornness of an older son – no doubt he was reflecting on the kind of love Joseph had shown him throughout his life.

And when Jesus told us we were to pray to God saying “Abba” – a tender word meaning “Daddy” – might he not have been remembering the tender love shown to him by Joseph?

And surely, when he faced painful moments in his life, or moments when a difficult decision had to be made, might not Jesus have remembered the story told him of his birth, and Joseph's decision to do the right thing, no matter the cost?

Oh indeed, Joseph's life helped to make Jesus into the kind of man he was. No surprise there – God knew it, God planned it to happen that way.

Joseph, the father of Jesus, was a good, humble, righteous man. Not the kind of man who would achieve superstar status in our day and age, unfortunately. Not the kind of man that would draw much attention, frankly.

You know, I read recently that the great Albert Einstein, at one point in his career, had two portraits on the wall of his office – portraits of brilliant scientists – Isaac Newton, and James Clark Maxwell, a noted physicist. But, after a number of years, he took those down, and replaced them with two others. One was of Albert Schweitzer, and the other was Mahatma Gandhi, for Einstein had come to realize that he needed not portraits of success, but of humility for guidance in his life. (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, "Christlikeness in God," p. 53)

Oh, dear friends, Joseph's life and experience can provide so much guidance for our lives as well. Let me just suggest three quick ways:

First, may his story remind us that, what seems like the worst day of our lives might end up turning out not to be so. God ended up taking the worst day of Joseph's life and turning it into the best day. And God can take the tattered pieces of our pain and make something good come out of it as well.

Adam Hamilton once said that "In my life God has always taken the pain, the disappointment, the heartache and used it in profound ways that I could only see and understand in hindsight. Today (he says) when I face moments of profound disappointment, and journeys that I don't want to take, I turn them over to God and invite him to, in the words of the Apostle Paul, 'make all things work together for good for those who love God, and are called according to his purpose.'" (Hamilton, *ibid*, p. 45)

Not a bad thing for us to do as well. To let Joseph's story remind us that the story doesn't have to end in our pain, but in trust that God will make something good come out of it.

Secondly, may Joseph's story remind us to always, always, always err on the side of compassion and grace. It is so easy to get mad and want to get even, to try to hurt back when we are hurt. It is much more difficult, at times, to show compassion

and grace – but Joseph would say, “Do it, anyway” because that’s the kind of God we serve. A God of grace and compassion.

And finally, may Joseph’s story cause us to do the right thing, as much as we can. Even when it’s the hardest thing to do – do the right thing. Because it is God’s will, and because God will give us what we need to do it. And when we do, when we do the right thing, in the words of Janet Hunt, “when you step up and do what is right and good in the face of earthly ‘wisdom’ or advice which would urge you otherwise, when you act with forgiveness and hope and trust, well then, the world changes. It surely did with Joseph and Mary and Jesus. And it does every other time, too.” (On-line, Janet Hunt, “Just What a Dad Does”)

You know, Joseph doesn’t show up much in the scriptures. We see him here in the pre-birth and birth stories, and we hear about him later when Jesus is a young boy. But after that, nary a word about him – about this man who was so very important in the life of our Savior.

It really doesn’t matter that we don’t read more about him, because we know all we need to know about this righteous and compassionate man. How? In his son Jesus – the man he became, the life he lived, the words he spoke, the choices he made. Jesus was his father’s son.

Thanks be to God for Joseph – for his courage, his compassion, his humility and grace. May we, through all the times of our lives, seek to be more like him, through the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.