

“Well son, do you s’pose you’ll ever amount to much?” I can still hear my grandfather ask me that question every morning at breakfast. I was living with him in the first year of my marriage. Funny thing, Sheila and I were commuting then...between Edmonton and Calgary. I worked for the Alberta Ballet in Edmonton and lived with my grandfather; Sheila worked for the department of Indian and Northern Affairs and stayed in our condo in Calgary until it sold. It was the early 80’s...we ended up walking away from it.

“Well son, do you s’pose you’ll ever amount to much?” With his Wonderbread toast piled high with peanut butter and jam, coffee dribbling out of the corner of his mouth, he’d look at me with his big saucer eyes, grin, pour me a cup of coffee and greet me with what sounds rude and unwelcoming. Truth be told, every time I heard it, I never felt more loved, more accepted and more welcome. My mother’s father and I had a wonderful connection; it was just too short.

I remember many years ago, long after he died, I took a course in Bowen Family Systems Theory. I had to present a snapshot of my family over the generations and to recount a few of the stories that made up the snapshot. It was one fellow who read my genogram, saw where my grandfather and grandmother divorced in 1944, when my mom was 15, heard my story of an incomplete connection to the men in my family, and said “what did your maternal grandfather teach you about being a man?” It was a major aha for me in my own growth and in that moment my grandfather became even more important to me.

That’s now the question I hear in mind every time I meet a young man who seeks me out as pastor, wrestling with their roles as fathers and providers, mentors and playmates, career seekers and lovers. I don’t remember what I said then; what I remember now is that my maternal grandfather taught me how to be vulnerable, how to love others in that vulnerability, and how to deal with trouble, sometimes he was wrong. He taught me playfulness and he taught me how to do the right thing. “Well son, do you s’pose you’ll ever amount to much?” I still laugh to myself when I hear it.

I want to ask you something. When you think of the Christmas story, what do you think of? What details come to mind? Right away we think of the stable, the animals, the shepherds, the angels, a crowded inn, and of course – round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild...yadda yadda yadda. Our hearts are filled with empathy thinking about a sweet, kind, tender virgin girl, scared and confused, who experienced a miraculous inception by the holy Spirit and delivers a perfect, quiet baby - “no crying” in fact - in very crude circumstances. Christmas card perfect. And according to the gospel of Matthew, all this to fulfil an ancient prophesy spoken some 800 years earlier. You heard Myrna read the story:

“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’”

In attempting to use the ancient Hebrew scriptures to prove text his position, not only did Matthew get the word wrong, he got the prophesy wrong.

The prophesy comes from Isaiah 7:14. That’s where Matthew begins. And for starters, the word he converts to virgin is *almah*; that’s the word used in the passage in Isaiah in its original Hebrew. But it’s not a word that describes the state of the girl’s sexual experience. It’s a word that describes a young girl who is of the age to marry. It’s a word that speaks of a maiden’s value in economic terms, particularly in relation to marriage in Hebrew society. This word describes one stage of a young woman’s development. And the word *almah* appears only 9 times in the whole bible. Each time, the word is used to describe a different situation. The Hebrew language has a very precise word to describe a young woman who has never had sex with a man: it’s *bethuwlah* NOT *almah*.

The second problem is that Isaiah used the word *almah*, not to begin to imagine a messianic future, but to prepare his hearers for the point he wants to make. If you go home and read Isaiah 7 this afternoon, you’ll see that Isaiah is talking about the likely invasion of Assyria – the political giant north of Judah and Israel. There is likely a pregnant young woman in the crowd listening to his message. He notices her, uses the situation to his advantage, as all great orators do and says “behold this young girl, this maiden, (*almah*) who is pregnant. He begins to speculate. Perhaps she’ll bear a son (of course Isaiah would say this, everyone wanted a son then.) Perhaps she will call that son Immanuel which means God with us. Every mother thinks her son is God. Isaiah might have known that. Maybe he was joking.

But Isaiah gets to the point of all this imagining: before that child reaches the age to discern good from bad, the two nations of Judah and Israel will fall to the empire in the north – Assyria. In the prophesy, Isaiah is saying, watch out, the thing you most fear is going to happen before this unborn child is three. And that’s exactly what happened. This prophesy was predicting an imminent disaster that happened; not some messianic hope 800 years in the future.

The writer of Matthew’s gospel did two of the worst things you can do with any piece of scripture – lift it out of context in an attempt to prove a point, and misinterpret the actual words. And what have we got 2000 years later? We have a Christmas fantasy – with music and carols and operas and oratorios, Christmas cards, mall displays and children’s pageants involving shepherds and angels, and crowded inns, and a stable. And we have a virgin girl giving birth to a child, with Christians around the world ready to practically kill each other depending on whether they believe this story as scientific fact.

Does anyone notice who is left holding the bag? Even though I don't like Matthew's assessment of what is happening - I don't like his theological agenda - I love the way he tells the story of Jesus' birth. I wish this story would come round more than once every three years in the lectionary cycle; I think we forget that it's Joseph who is left to make the mess work.

Do you know there is not one song about Joseph; at least not before 2006? That was the year I asked one of the creative writers in the congregation at Trinity, Vernon to write a children's pageant from Joseph's perspective, and my friend Keri Wehlander to write a song lyric to which I'd write the music. Prior to then I couldn't find a song, a pageant a prayer, a call to worship, an oratorio, anything in the liturgy of the church, exploring what it was like to be the provider for this family. Matthew's gospel is pretty clear about what it might have been like, but the only thing that remains in our liturgy from Matthew's gospel is the whole virgin thing. In the tradition, Joseph is silent, his actions unnoticed, his love unmeasured.

And for my money and from my perspective as a man trying to figure out what it means to put one foot in front of the other in this game we call life, besides my grandfather, Joseph teaches me something about being a man who loves. Not by anything he says but by what he does. Let's have a brief look at the story once more...

"When Jesus' mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

See now right away I have questions...who found her to be with child? How would they know? And really, with no ob/gy physician around, no one could verify whether she had been with a man. But I digress. I will say what we have here is something more than an engagement. We have betrothal...this is a contract of promise - a binding agreement between two families. We have a legal commitment here. And Joseph finds out, likely from Mary, that she's pregnant...she's probably stopped menstruating. That's how she'd suspect she was pregnant.

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

Joseph is following Hebrew law here. A Jewish divorce then was very public and it forever changed the reputation of the *almah*. And Joseph, likely torn between what the law said and what his heart said, chose a quiet breaking of the contract.

"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. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

There are lots of probing questions I could ask in what I just read; especially if someone is trying to get this story to prove a scientific point. But I don't think that's helpful. For this morning, I'm interested in one man's internal struggle between doing things right as required by Jewish law, or doing the right thing.

Joseph the silent sentinel in the entire birth saga throughout the centuries is the one who teaches about the loving thing to do, despite his fear, his own anger, certainly his own vulnerability. Mary, the one he loves perhaps, the one upon whom his future rests is pregnant, uncertain about the father; and the law says divorce her. There is only one question in this situation. There is only one question in any situation when we're faced with the dilemma of doing things right, or doing the right thing. What would love do now? You've heard me ask that before. What would love do now? I'd lie awake at night myself, hoping my dreams brought me some kind of sign. I wonder what angel taught Joseph about being a man in the first century.

In the end, Joseph moved through his fear, and makes love's choice; as he perceived it, in the first century. But if we're not careful, we'll miss his full commitment to the future if we read the story too quickly. Listen carefully: "he took (Mary) as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus." Joseph named the baby, he named him Jesus, just like it came to him in his sleep. He didn't have to. Naming the baby was his to do. There was no threat of death if he didn't. There was no lightning rod. There was simply an absence of fear. And Joseph says yes to his future.

Today we're called to make love's choice every time a dilemma faces us. We might make the choice Joseph made, in the first century; we might make a different choice now. Even when we're afraid, it's ours to make, and live with the consequences. It's what makes us lovers of the world. Joseph's story teaches us how. Amen.