

“Joseph’s Dilemma”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for December 24<sup>th</sup> 2018 (Christmas Eve)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 1: 18-25

Joseph faced a dilemma: the dilemma just about any man would confront when coming face-to-face with the troubling news that his fiancé had...under puzzling circumstances...managed to get herself pregnant.

That’s a dilemma which becomes crystal clear only because we have Matthew’s Gospel. Mark and John appear to have no knowledge—or if they did have knowledge no interest—in the story of Christmas. Luke appears to be aware of what we have come to call the Virgin Birth...although it’s never spelled out by Luke with quite the clarity with which it’s named in Matthew. Because it is Matthew...and only Matthew...who clarifies the nature of the dilemma facing Joseph as he ponders the possibility of renouncing his engagement to Mary: doing it *quietly* lest she be put to shame. Not that Matthew ever explains how that would actually turn out for Mary in the small town of Nazareth, where her little secret would certainly spread despite Joseph’s best efforts at discretion! Indeed!

Franco Zeffirelli, in the Christmas section of his made-for-TV series “Jesus of Nazareth”....from way back in the 1970s...depicted Joseph having a nightmare: a nightmare in which the good citizens of Nazareth hurl stones at Mary, when they learn of the illegitimacy of the child to whom she will soon give birth. Nor do I think Zeffirelli was being fanciful with that scene; surely that is precisely the sort of consideration with which Joseph must have wrestled as he pondered whether to stay with Mary or—in the event that he did end their engagement—as he considered how he would undertake that step in a way that would minimize potential harm to his betrothed. But, of course....as we all know....Joseph, like his Old Testament namesake, had a dream: a dream in which an angel appeared to him....a dream in which all was revealed: making Joseph’s decision an easy one: provided, of course...provided he was willing to trust the angel...provided, of course, that he was willing to trust his dream.

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There it is. That word. The word “trust”. Trust, as in the English word that does the best job of describing what we Christians mean when we use that **other** English word, that loaded English word: faith. Faith. As in the faith that brings us to this place tonight. As in the faith that always stands in tension with the very real doubts that are an inevitable part of the life of faith, for the simple reason that doubt is an inevitable part of each and every human life. And yes:

....Joseph serves as a fine stand-in for just about every contemporary human being, which is to say that **his** dilemma—in a very real sense—is also **our** dilemma. Confronted by the account of Christ’s extraordinary conception and birth...

...for that matter, confronted by **any** miraculous claim ancient or modern...

....it is only right and proper and fitting that we **do** ask tough questions. Faith is most certainly a Christian virtue...but credulity is most certainly **not** a virtue, Christian or otherwise. Then again...neither is rank cynicism. And yet somewhere...somewhere in the balance...at the tension point between credulity and cynicism stands faith...simple trust...at the very least: a willingness to open oneself...to open oneself to the claims of God's creative presence in this world....God's creative energies still at work in the world. Claims that seem especially pressing...especially unavoidable at this time of year. Claims that seem especially impossible to side-step at Christmas.

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Consider! Consider the substance of what the Christian tradition wants to say to us at Christmas. To borrow a sentence from St. Paul: we might say that the heart of Christmas is the affirmation that "God was in Christ making peace with our world." Or going further still—making use of the sophisticated theological language of John's Gospel: Christmas involves the "Word"...

...not just any old word but God's Word...

...having been made flesh: in short, having become fully human, Creator-God becoming a creature, in the flesh of the baby Jesus.

And the question for me...the question I want to place before you...is how could such a thing transpire...how could such a wonder unfold...**without** leaving at least some trace to remind us of its outrageousness? When it comes to Easter, that trace of outrageousness is known as the "Empty Tomb". And yes: when it comes to Christmas, that trace of outrageousness is known as the "Virgin Birth". Outrageousness. But also....also....also: beauty...beauty and tenderness...as Creator (the Creator of the UNIVERSE!) nestles safely in the arms of His mother...and yes...safely in the arms of His father. None other than this Joseph....this Joseph...

...who at the end of the day chose to trust his dream...chose to trust the angel...in effect chose to embrace the possibility of wonder...chose to embrace the truly outrageous news—in the face of every bit of evidence that might convince us otherwise—the outrageous news that this beautiful/puzzling/curious/at times heartbreaking/at times obscenely hurtful world, remains God's world. The world in which God delighted from the beginning; the world God was not ashamed to make his own in every conceivable way, with the coming of the Christ: with the coming of the baby Jesus, with the coming of the Word-made-flesh.

May the joyful news of his birth fill our hearts, fill our lives, overflow into every nook and cranny of our world. This day...and always! Thanks be to God.