

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday of Advent: Called to Trust

Salvation takes us down winding roads

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 18

Advent Candle: People in Darkness vs 1 [124] (no slides—hymnal 124)

Opening Hymn: Prepare the way, O Zion (129)

Choruses: Emmanuel, Emmanuel, The Solid Rock

Closing Hymn: Hark the glad sound [118] or Lo! Christ comes with clouds [120]

Fourth Sunday of Advent

If you could start life all over again,
And do things differently,
What would you change?

One contributor on the social question and answer website
Quora said he'd do this:

Care less about other people's opinions,
Spend more time doing things he loved,
Focus on quality instead of quantity,
Balance his professional and personal life better,
And not worry so much about the future.

If *you* could start your life over again,
How would you do things differently?

And what difference
would it make in your life
If you gave more room for God?

If you gave more room for God in
Do you think that life would be easier or more difficult?
Would you regularly find yourself in situations
that were pleasant or unsettling?

Today's lesson takes us to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew.
Following a long genealogy,
we are introduced to a man named Joseph,
The man we know as the husband of Mary
and father of Jesus.

Aside from the birth narratives and genealogies of Matthew & Mark
Joseph's name isn't mentioned directly
Elsewhere in Scripture.ⁱ

Maybe for this reason, we don't give Joseph much attention.
But there is much to learn about him.

This Joseph reminds of other important stories in Scripture.

Can you think of another Joseph,
Someone who also had dreams,
someone was also instrumental
in the salvation of God's people?

That's right, the Joseph with the technicolor dream coat.

In the genealogical account preceding today's reading,
As well as in today's angelic greeting
Joseph is shown to be a descendant of King David.

God promised David
That his kingdom would endure
And that his throne would last forever.ⁱⁱ

Because of this promise,
The people were expecting a Messiah.
And Joseph falls into this lineage.

More specifically we are told that Joseph
Is "faithful to law",
or as noted in some other translations is 'righteous'.

In the broadest sense this tells us
that Joseph keeps the commandments,
that he is conformed to the will of God,
and deemed acceptable to God.ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally we are told that Joseph is pledged to be married
To Mary, but that this marriage has yet to be consummated.

In their time such a betrothal was a legal "financial agreement
between families that often lasted about a year."^{iv}
The betrothal could only be broken by death or divorce.

Joseph is a righteous, descendant of David,
with a weighty name and an impending marriage.

But at some point, in his courtship with Mary
Joseph discovers that Mary hasn't just
put on a little extra weight as some people do.

Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant,
And he knows that he isn't the father.
Of all the things that an engaged couple might discover about each other,
This has got to be among the worst possible news.

Imagine that you learned this about your fiancé?
 This would break trust and cause you to question
 Everything you knew about them.

But Joseph's recognition occurs
 in an ancient honor and shame society where
 "the honor of the family, honor of the tribe, your village...
 is [paramount]".^v

In Israel there would be the added layer of how this indiscretion
 Would color other peoples' perception of Joseph.
 While Joseph knew he was innocent
 He would be tainted all the same.

Joseph discovers the hard news.
 We can only imagine
 how his world would have been shattered.

The only response for him, a righteous man
 Would be to exit the arrangement through divorce.
 (the law does not allow him to "forgive and forget.")^{vi}

That being said we are told that he
 doesn't want to make a scene or extract revenge.
 Joseph is a righteous man, but he is also compassionate,
 and intends to divorce Mary quietly.

But before Joseph can enact these plans he has a dream.
 The angel of the Lord, the same angel who appeared
 To Abraham stopping him from sacrificing Isaac,
 Shows up in Joseph dream, to quash his plans.

The angel tells Joseph "do not be afraid
 to take Mary home as your wife".

So why shouldn't he divorce her?
 It is the customary and legally proper thing to do?

The angel tells Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful.
 No, this pregnancy has been initiated by the Holy Spirit.
 She is bearing a son who will "save his people from their sins."

Now that's some message.
 God is doing something new,
 And it is happening with Mary...
 And Joseph.
 To say that Mary's child is "from the Holy Spirit"
 is to say that this is a radically new beginning

[more importantly] that it is God's doing [alone].^{vii}

But if Joseph has no role in the baby's conception,
 He still has an important role in the family.
 He is told to take Mary as his wife
 And to name the child Jesus.

This is significant.
 As one scholar notes: "By naming the baby...
 Joseph adopts Jesus, and thus incorporates him
 legally into David's genealogy."^{viii}

And so Jesus will be, in the words of the Apostles' Creed:
 "conceived by the Holy Spirit
 and born of the virgin Mary."^{ix}

And if Joseph accepts this calling
 Jesus will be through Joseph
 a descendent of David,
 the line that God promised to bless.

He will also grow up with a human father
 as a protector and guide.

So what does Joseph do after dreaming this dream
 And seeing this vision?
 What would you do?

What is being declared is hopeful but unimaginable.
 What Joseph is being asked to do unsettles
 his hopes or dreams for a normal life.

So what does Joseph do?
 Joseph says 'Yes!'.

We are told that "When Joseph woke up,
 he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him
 and took Mary home as his wife."^x

Joseph will take on this task,
 Despite knowing that Jesus' questionable parentage
 Will mean that the family will always be subject to gossip.

Joseph will take on this risk,
 Even though it opens the door
 To more dreams and new challenges:
 Fleeing to Egypt and then coming back home.

Despite this dislocation Joseph says 'Yes'.
 He trusts that God will use this baby for unimaginable good.

Maybe it is not all that surprising that God
 Recruits a young couple for this new work of salvation.
 Young people are up for an adventure.
 The older we grow,
 The more tied we become to life
 As we have arranged it.

And yet God isn't ageist.
 Something astounding happens to Mary and Joseph.
 And some astonishing happens to Mary's cousin Elizabeth
 And her husband Zechariah who are described in the Bible
 As both 'very old'.^{xi}

Elizabeth becomes pregnant
 Even though she's already collecting her pension.

PAUSE

Could it be that God intends to disrupt your life this season.
 Could it be that God wants to derail your plans
 In order to facilitate some work of salvation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in Life Together,

"We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God.
 God will be constantly crossing our paths
 and canceling our plans by sending us people
 with claims and petitions."^{xii}

These sorts of interruptions will unsettle our lives.
 But taking part in God's plans of salvation
 Will give us a deep sense of purpose
 That can't be found anywhere else.

Joseph said 'yes'.
 Mary said 'yes'.
 May we say 'yes' too!

Amen.

ⁱ See Zondervan, . New International Encyclopedia of Bible Characters (Zondervan's Understand the Bible Reference Series) (p. 374). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition. Joseph is mentioned twice in passing in John.

ⁱⁱ 2 Samuel 7:16 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ See Strong's Greek: 1342. δίκαιος (dikaïos) -- correct, righteous, by impl. innocent." 6 May. 2022, biblehub.com/greek/1342.htm.

^{iv} See notes of Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (NIV) p1609

^v "Discovering the Honor-Shame Cultural Paradigm." KnowledgeWorkx, 17 Nov. 2022, www.knowledgeworkx.com/post/discovering-the-honor-shame-cultural-paradigm.

^{vi} Douglas R. A. Hare, "Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 1:18–25," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 93.

^{vii} Charles M. Wood, "Theological Perspective on Matthew 1:18–25," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 96.

^{viii} Douglas R. A. Hare, "Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 1:18–25," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 95.

^{ix} "Apostles' Creed." Christian Reformed Church, 15 Dec. 2022, www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/apostles-creed.

^x Matthew 1:24 NIV

^{xi} See Luke 1:7 NIV

^{xii} "Interruption Is God's Invitation." *Desiring God*, 16 Dec. 2022, www.desiringgod.org/articles/interruption-is-gods-invitation.