

(Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus

Dilemmas, Choices and Consequences

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Text: Matthew 1:18-25

I want to begin this morning with a true story. It is a story of my grandfather, the Baptist minister. It is a story that has long moved me. And yet, I confess, it is only recently that I have thought of its meaning for this season.

The date is 1935, in the middle of the great depression. The place is rural mid-State Louisiana, a little town in Winn Parish. Winnfield, the Parish seat, was the home of Huey Long, if that means anything to you. But this story took place in the tiny crossroads town of Sikes, Louisiana, about twenty miles from the Parish seat.

In Sikes Louisiana in 1935 a disturbing not so unusual event took place. A young unmarried woman became pregnant. Today such an event is more common, and certainly more acceptable than it was in 1935. In 1935 it was scandal of high proportions. And so the young pregnant woman was an embarrassment to her family, and she was ostracized by her family. In the end, the young woman and her baby died in childbirth. The exact reasons for her death are unclear. Many women died in childbirth then, especially in rural home births. But it seems that this young woman, disowned by her family, lacked even minimal psychological support and physical nourishment during the pregnancy. Almost everyone said she died because she became too weak and ill and un-cared for to bear the child.

It fell to my grandfather to preach the young woman's funeral. And he was given strict instructions by the young woman's father. Her father told my grandfather, the minister, "I don't want you to hold back one thing when you preach her service. I don't want any soft-pedaling of the situation. My daughter was a sinner, and I want you to preach about sin. I want you to preach hellfire and brimstone."

My grandfather nodded his understanding.

Two days later the service took place in the little country church. My grandfather slowly approached the pulpit. And he began with something like these words:

Brothers and sisters, I have been asked to talk plainly to you today. I have been asked to point to the sin of this situation. And I have been asked to preach the consequences of sin, the wages of sin. I have been asked to preach about the fire of damnation.

Well, brothers and sisters, I want to honor that request. For there has been a great sin committed in this situation. This young woman was not the only person involved. Somewhere there is a young man who played a part in this. Somewhere there is a young man who did not come forward and accept his own responsibility in this. He left this woman to face her fate herself. I want to tell

you, brothers and sisters, there may have been a sin of the flesh committed, but that sin of passion is nothing compared to the sin of a man who has month after month to come forward, but willfully decides to leave this woman whom he made pregnant to deal with it all by herself. So, brothers and sisters, when I am asked to preach about the sin committed that caused this young woman to die, I want to ask, where is that young man who could have taken responsibility for his actions, but chose instead to walk away?

Imagine, 1935, the rural south, and a Southern Baptist preacher. I always loved and admired my grandfather, but there is not story of his ministry that makes me prouder than this one.

In today's reading we meet another kind of man. Joseph found himself in a horrible predicament. He is engaged to Mary. Joseph and Mary have practiced pre-marital abstinence. And suddenly Joseph finds that his fiancée is, nonetheless, pregnant. In Joseph's mind, the conclusion of Mary's infidelity is unmistakable.

Now, we are talking about Judea 2000 years ago. If we could expect 1935 Louisiana to be harsh on sins of the flesh, first century Judea was positively unmerciful toward infidelity. For her apparent indiscretion, Mary could have been stoned to death. We read that Joseph neither wanted to exact that kind of punishment, nor did he even want to publicly disgrace Mary. Instead he was willing to call off the marriage secretly. By the standard of his day, Joseph was acting with more compassion than the situation required.

But then Joseph is directed by an angel in a dream that he is not to call off the wedding, but that he is to wed Mary, whose child is of the Holy Spirit and is to be named Jesus and who will become a savior to people. Joseph accepts the word of the angel in the dream and weds Mary. Jesus is born, and you know how the story goes. And of course, 2000 years later we continue to celebrate this birth, and to look to Jesus as God's word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us, the light that shone into the darkness.

The story is so familiar to us that we cannot imagine it any other way. But it could have been a very different story. Joseph faced a dilemma, a choice. If he dismissed Mary for her apparent infidelity, he would be rid of her, and Mary would be left alone to face her future in much the same way that young woman in Sikes, Louisiana in 1935 had to face hers. It is quite clear that Mary would have faced a difficult and uncertain time, and quite possibly death one way or another. If Joseph dismissed Mary, then he would not have to deal believing his fiancée's fidelity based on an angel appearing in a dream.

Oddly enough, when Jesus decides to go ahead and wed Mary, he completely removes any disgrace from her. I was unaware that engaged couples were allowed to live with one another in ancient Judea. So, Mary's pregnancy would not be all that unexpected. The only way that Mary becomes disgraced or executed is if Joseph claims she has been unfaithful. But for Joseph the decision to wed Mary means that he is willing to live with the knowledge that the child she carries is not his. In fact we learn Joseph is willing to believe the angel that the Holy Spirit has fathered the child.

I for one find Joseph's decisions remarkable. We are told that because he is good and righteous, Joseph's first thought is to leave Mary in the way that causes the least amount of

punishment and disgrace. And then we learn that Joseph is willing to go farther than that, much farther. Joseph is willing to wed Mary and receive this child of the Holy Spirit.

In these two stories we have two very different men. In 1935 in Sikes, Louisiana we have a man who got a young woman pregnant and then refused to take any responsibility for his actions whatsoever. The young woman, disgraced, disowned and disavowed died because this man refused to come forward and do the right thing.

In ancient Judea we have a man who by every version of the story bears no responsibility for Mary's pregnancy. If Joseph acts even in responsible and righteous ways, he could walk away from the situation and leave Mary to fend for herself. Even though Joseph would be not be acting irresponsibly, the results would quite likely be similar to those in the first story. But Joseph does even more than the right thing. Joseph believes the unbelievable, Joseph accepts an outlandish story he hears from an angel in a dream, and weds Mary. In doing so, he insures that Mary receives the societal protection of marriage for her pregnancy. In doing so he assures the birth of the savior.

These two men and the very different choices they made interest me. What made one choose deadly irresponsibility? And what made the other choose more than was required of him in the face of what had to seem a ludicrous story? I am interested in these two different choices because the consequences of each choice are so radically obvious, in one case death and in the other life and the birth of the very flesh of God.

And I am interested in the two men, for in every time men and women are called on to make choices that lead to life and death nearly every day. And I have come to believe that it is just too simple an answer to say that some people are like the man in Sikes, Louisiana, who choose what my grandfather said was sin, while others are like Joseph, who by nature do the right thing. I have come to believe that it is just too simple to believe that some are unambiguously sinners and others are righteous by nature. I have come to believe that too cleanly cleaving the world into the good and the evil makes too little room to expect more from the wrongdoer, and it gives too little credit for the hard choices the right-doer makes. Even the best of us are tempted by bad choices. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert, you will remember. And even the most malicious among us have the capacity to make right choices.

Harry Potter is, of course, the hero of the Harry Potter series. Harry Potter is the epitome of what a hero is supposed to be. Harry has an unmistakable and unshakable goodness about him. But on close inspection we find that Harry is more complicated than he first appears.

When the first year students arrive at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, they are assigned to one of the four houses of the school. The students sits on a stool and place the sorting hat on their heads, and the hat decides what house they belong to. A tear in the old hat turns out to be a mouth, and it shouts out the assignment: Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, or Gryffindor. At two ends of the spectrum are Slytherin and Gryffindor. Slytherin has turned out more dark wizards than any other house. Its students are arrogant and unlikable. Its symbol is a snake, and its whole atmosphere is of a slithering serpent. Gryffindor, on the other hand, is symbolized by the lion, and in this house are the brave and the loyal.

When Harry Potter sits on the stool to be sorted, he prays that he will end up in Gryffindor, which, of course, he does. But it isn't as simple as that. When he is on the stool, Harry hears the hat saying to him, "You would make a good Slytherin." Harry prays harder to be

assigned to Gryffindor, and he is. But Harry is plagued for a very long time by the voice that said he would be a good Slytherin.

Finally, at the end of the second book, Harry talks to the head of school, Dumbledore, about what he had heard from the sorting hat.

Harry said, "The sorting hat told me I'd – I'd have done well in Slytherin."

Dumbledore allowed that the hat was right, Harry would have done well in Slytherin. Harry is devastated. He says,

"So I should be in Slytherin," looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it –"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students -- resourcefulness -- determination -- a certain disregard for rules," he added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin...."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from [the evil one]. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."¹

It's our choices that show what we truly are. We Congregationalists stand in a the long Christian tradition that considers humans to be fallen, inherently sinful. That idea has meant many things to many people. To some it has meant that as human beings we are utterly depraved and are saved only by God's grace and mercy through Jesus Christ.

Oddly enough, Jesus himself never said anything at all like that. Jesus talked more about the choices we face and the fact that we are often enticed by the wrong choices. It seems he thought that being fallen meant that we were susceptible to making choices with devastating consequences. Maybe that was because Jesus knew about temptation and choice first hand. Maybe it was because he knew that had Joseph chosen differently, he, Jesus, might not even have been born. And maybe that's why almost every story Jesus ever told was a story about making the right choice, and the consequences of making the wrong one.

A man in 1935 rural Louisiana made one choice. Joseph in ancient Judea made a different one. And the choices they made made all the difference. May God guide our choices always. Amen.

¹*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, J.K. Rowling, New York, Scholastic Inc, p. 333