

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

(Lk 2.1—7)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiahⁱ 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;^j and he named him Jesus.¹

ⁱ Or *Jesus Christ*

^j Other ancient authorities read *her firstborn son*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

The Cherry Tree, Joseph and the Son of God

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Text: *Matthew 1:18-25*

Joseph finds himself in a humiliating predicament. He and Mary are engaged to be married. The Greek carries much of the same meaning many of us males have experienced in the dance of courtship today. It means that Joseph has courted Mary, that he has wooed her, that he has declared his unfailing love for her and wants her to be his bride. Mary has accepted. The announcements have gone out. The families have begun making plans. Joseph's friends are kidding him about the fact that he can no longer appear on the TV program "The Bachelor." In fact, it may well be that Joseph and Mary have made a commitment even stronger than being engaged. There is some evidence that the term 'betrothed' refers to a formal, pre-marriage arrangement, which lasted a year and could only be broken by a divorce. Whatever the exact meaning, Joseph and Mary have made their plans for marriage known in the most public way.

And then there comes a jarring discovery. Mary is found to be with child. We are told that Joseph and Mary had not had pre-marital relations. Mary is found to be with child, and there can be but one explanation, a crushing one for both of them, and an especially humiliating one for Joseph. Joseph can believe but one thing: he has been cuckolded by his betrothed.

There is a lovely and simple carol that catches how we might imagine Joseph's feelings. It comes from the 1400s in the Coventry Plays in England. Later it found its way into the Appalachian mountains. There it was often sung and played on the Dulcimer, which is how I learned it. It's also a favorite of the Cambridge Christmas Revels, the years they take up an American music theme. I'm going to try to play a bit of it for you this morning from a Revels recording. Listen to how Joseph handles the news that Mary is with child. (Read words only if recording doesn't work)

1. When Joseph was an old man,
And an old man was he,
He courted Virgin Mary,
The Queen of Galilee.

2. Now Joseph and Mary
Were a-walking one day
Here is apples and cherries
Aplenty to be seen.

3. Mary spoke to Joseph
So meek and so mild
Joseph, gather me some cherries
For I am with child.

4. Then Joseph flew in anger,
In anger he flew;
Let the father of the baby
Gather the cherries for you.

Then Joseph flew in anger. “Let the father of your baby gather cherries for you.” When Joseph heard the news of his bride to be, one imagines he felt he felt anger, hurt and betrayal. The “Cherry Tree Carol” captures this response with a simple folk-tale elegance.

In the Biblical account we do not get Joseph’s immediate reaction. There are no cherry trees, thrown dishes or screaming matches. But we do get his response not long after he had cooled down a bit. It says, “Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” The Message, a paraphrased version of the Bible, is a little more speculative about his feelings. It says, “Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.” Either way, in a remarkable turn of events, Joseph puts aside whatever anger and desire for revenge or justice that he has, and he decides to quietly break off the betrothal. He decides to dismiss her quietly.

To understand how remarkable Joseph is, we need to forget our familiarity with the story. We need to forget for a moment that this is the virgin Mary we are talking about. We need to forget for a moment that this is the baby Jesus we are talking about. We need to forget for a moment that this is the Christmas story we are talking about. For at least a moment, we need to forget all we know about this story except what it must have felt like to find out that your betrothed is responsible for child about to come into the world, and you are not the other parent of that child. I say it that way, that your betrothed is responsible for child about to come into the world, and you are not the other parent of that child, because we also must not think this plot works only because male ego or male bravado is at stake. For if Mary were to find out that while they are betrothed Joseph has made another woman pregnant, she, no doubt, would be just as hurt and betrayed as Joseph is now. When we take away the familiarity and warm feelings we have toward the Christmas story, when we face the raw human emotion the plot creates, then we may realize just how extraordinary Joseph was. Rather than seek revenge, rather than act out of rage, Joseph is “unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace” and instead decides to end the betrothal with as little notice as possible.

Joseph has every right to feel good about how he has acted. One imagines that as he heads to bed that night, he is still grappling with his world turned upside down. A million feelings are coursing through him. Joseph is still stunned at what has happened. But, nonetheless, he can go to bed that night knowing that he has risen above his pride and shown compassion even in the face of heartbreaking hurt.

Were the story to end here, Joseph would be my hero. I would want to point out Joseph to all the leaders around the world today who believe that the only right thing to do is return violence for violence or hurt for hurt. I would want to point out how much better a decision Joseph made than they are making, even though by most lights Joseph had plenty of justification to make Mary pay. Even if the story ended here, I would want to point out that by responding with maturity and compassion, Joseph refused to make a bad situation worse. Joseph would be my hero even if the story ended here because he is a bold argument against striking out justified by righteous anger.

But of course, the story doesn't end here. For as Joseph sleeps this night he has a dream that asks even more of him. An angel of Lord comes and says, "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."

Now, we come to a spot I want to challenge you a little this morning. I want to go out on a limb a bit with you. At this point in such a sermon Johnny Ray Youngblood, the great New York preacher, would say, I want you to pray for me brothers and sisters.

At this point in the story it is altogether too easy for us, partly again because we know and love and trust this story so well, at this point in the story it is altogether too easy for us to say, "Phew, Joseph is about to leave the virgin Mary, but the angel of the Lord comes and straightens it all out. The angel of the Lord comes and tells Joseph don't worry, the Holy Spirit is the father of Mary's baby, and that instead of experiencing humiliation, you will find you are a player in the birth of Jesus the Messiah." It's altogether too easy to believe that Joseph has this dream and awakes and does as he is told because his hurts and fears have been erased. It's altogether too easy to believe that Joseph now knows that Mary has been faithful all along and that God is the father of her child. It is altogether too easy to believe that Joseph now has his anxieties relieved and he plays his well-known role in the story.

I want to suggest that Joseph woke up just as convinced of Mary's unfaithfulness as when he went to bed that night. I want to suggest that Joseph tossed and turned that night, and that he may well have dreamed, and many of his dreams were nightmares. But I want to suggest that something else was going on in Joseph's mind that night. I want to suggest that along with all the conflicting emotions and visions that Joseph experienced that night, he saw that quietly divorcing Mary, as justified as he was by law, and as much more compassionate it was than what he could have done, Joseph saw that quietly divorcing Mary was not a neutral act. Part of what made Joseph toss and turn so much that night was his realization that when he divorced Mary, no matter how discreetly, the future for her and her child was exceedingly bleak. Adultery was ordinarily a capital crime. And even if execution were escaped, neither Mary nor her illicit child would have had societal or religious standing. Very likely they would not have survived. If they had, a life of impoverishment and shame would have been the result. Even if Joseph's choice of quiet divorce was meant to avoid publicly disgracing her, he knew the outcome would not be so gentle. Joseph tossed and turned that night, because he understood what the law and society called for. He was part of that society. He functioned under that law. It was who he was. And yet finally he could not bring himself to do what by all rights he was supposed to do. He could not bring himself to be what everything had taught him he was. Despite every good rationalization to do so, despite what everything he knew and believed dictated, Joseph found himself unable to put Mary and her unborn child out to the dogs. Joseph awoke determined to take Mary as his wife.

The old story we love so much says that Mary was a virgin and that the Holy Spirit was Jesus' father. Over the ages that miracle has been held close by generations of believers. And I have no need to dissuade you from believing it.

But for me there is an even greater miracle in the story. It is the miracle that Joseph not only saw beyond his anger, but that he also transcended the very norms and realities of his culture and his being, and in doing so, he quite literally, saved Mary and Jesus. For me, the most meaningful evidence of the Holy Spirit in this story is the Spirit that could cause Joseph to see so far beyond himself and his circumstance, that could allow him to cut so deeply against the grain.

For me, the strongest evidence that Jesus bears the marks of God's incarnation, is that he who by all rights should have died as a child or infant hardly noticed was instead saved by Joseph. Joseph managed to see, to behold a child of God in his betrothed's apparently illicit pregnancy. Jesus, whom we say came to save the world, in the first instance, needed to be saved himself.

Perhaps it is in being saved, in being taken in as a child of God in these most unlikely of circumstances, that Jesus himself became the Son of God. Perhaps it is in transcending one's situation, as Joseph did, that allows miracles to happen. Perhaps it is in recognizing God's incarnation in the most implausible situations and persons, as Joseph did, that we invite God into our existence, to dwell among us, Emmanuel. Perhaps it is in these ways, through miracles that seem to exceed but surely show the best of human being that God becomes the Prince of Peace. Perhaps, in the end, this is what we find in that rude stable on which we look with such fondness and hope. Perhaps then, like T.S. Eliot's Magi, we will find there a birth that makes the old dispensation seem like death. And perhaps we will leave the place irrevocably changed, no longer at ease clutching the old idols that we had taken to be our Gods. And maybe we'll be grateful as we walk away and find ourselves humming:

When Joseph was an old man,
And an old man was he,
He courted Virgin Mary,
The Queen of Galilee.
Amen.