

21-12-25 sermon

If I were to ask you, “What do you know about Joseph, husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus,” what could you tell me? The truth is, the bible doesn’t tell us much about Joseph. early all of what we know is from the birth narratives found in Luke’s Gospel, which we saw acted out last week in the pageant, and from Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus. Let me read that for us now, and try to picture that scene as I do.

Matthew 1.18-25

As you listened to that, what were you picturing? What does Joseph look like, lying asleep in bed? What kind of room is he sleeping in? What kind of expression does he have on his face as he lies there? Are the wrinkles on his face from age, or from restlessness? What was he thinking about before he eventually fell asleep? The text suggests he may well have been pondering what to do about the situation in which he finds himself: the woman he is engaged to is pregnant, and he knows he had no part in that happening. The Law is clear what he must do: divorce her. This may sound a little strange to our western, twenty-first century ears: “Wait, don’t you have to be married to get divorced? They’re just engaged. He can just back out, right?” Matthew’s original audience wouldn’t have found it strange that Joseph had resolved to divorce Mary following the revelation of her pregnancy, because for all intents and purposes, becoming betrothed to another person carried the same legal status as marriage. If something happened before the wedding itself, then the only way to dissolve the union was by divorce. Similarly, if the young woman’s fiancée died, she became a widow. A betrothed couple did not live together, nor did they consummate the marriage until their wedding night. At least that was supposed to be the case. And as engaged couples rarely had a minute to themselves, let alone as a couple, that usually was the case.

But somehow, Joseph discovers Mary is indeed pregnant.

Did she break the news to him? Did she tell him the circumstances of this baby? We don’t know. But it’s probably safe to say, she did tell him. But if some of us struggle with the idea of a ‘virgin birth’ today, even after two thousand years of Christian doctrine saying that was the case, we can only imagine how Joseph might have responded if Mary did indeed tell him who the father of her child was. “The father of your child is the Holy Spirit? Hmm. OK.”

Now, centuries of European Christian art and sermons have left us with the impression that Joseph was much older than Mary, and portrayed him as a kindly old man who took pity on this young girl. The reality was – for most couples in Galilee – that they were much closer in age. From Jewish history and rabbinic writings, we know young Jewish women married somewhere between 12 and 14 years of age. Young men were expected to take on adult responsibilities around the same time.

Those young men typically got married some time around 18-20 years old, having had the chance to save up a little money for marriage. So, however we pictured Joseph lying there in his bed on that special night, his beard may have been a bit straggly, and certainly without a hint of grey hair.

Betrothal – becoming engaged to be married – was mostly a commercial act. The concept of being “in love” was not really relevant even if a young couple were. A bride price might be paid to the girl’s family, or a dowry might be promised to the young man’s family. There may well have been a bit of haggling involved, which sometimes led to the engagement not even taking place. But once they were betrothed, it was as if they were married, even though they lived apart, with their families until the wedding night. Plans were made, the couple might be able to steal a few moments alone here and there, but certainly not long enough to consummate the relationship before the night. But sometimes things happen. And while a couple doing so was far less serious than, say, adultery by one of them, if the young girl did become pregnant before the wedding night, the rest of the village would have questioned the moral commitment of both parties.

Restraint was expected and admired.

But here we have Joseph, who’s lying in bed, knowing he has restrained himself. But Mary is pregnant. Divorce would absolutely be expected, and supported by the community. In Jewish, Greek and Roman law, a man must divorce his wife if she were found guilty of adultery. If Joseph paid a bride price, he can claim it back. If Mary’s family provided a dowry, he can have it impounded. He may profit financially from this divorce – and no one would think any the worse of him for it. Clearly Joseph has been pondering what to do, and has made up his mind: he will quietly divorce Mary. Because – as Matthew informs us – Joseph is a righteous man. He’s unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. So, rather than take her before the village elders to divorce her, he’ll do so quietly. Sure, the word will get around once people realize the wedding is not going to happen. And apparently it did, as we’ll hear later in Matthew’s Gospel, when some in the crowd say, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Mary?” And everyone would snicker, because the implication is Jesus doesn’t know who is biological father is. But even if Joseph was “in love” with Mary, and went ahead and married her anyway, when people discovered he was not the father of the child she bore, they would have viewed Joseph with contempt. For letting his love for a woman outweigh defending his honor.

But Matthew wants his audience to understand something. When he introduces Joseph as “a righteous man,” he is saying, “here is someone to learn from. A truly moral character who can teach us something about faithfulness, about discipline, and about placing the honor of others before one’s own. That is no small thing to say about someone who – whatever choice he makes – will lose honor because of it.

So, having rejected the legally appropriate choice of public divorce, Joseph chooses the option that will spare Mary's shame as much as is possible. Perhaps that's what he's thinking about when he finally drifts off to sleep, and dreams of an angel of the Lord, who either confirms what Mary has already told him (but which he apparently did not believe, if that was the case), or he learns the identity of Mary's child's father for the first time. The angel tells him to take Mary as his wife, and when she gives birth to her son, give him the name, Jesus, Yeshua – Joshua – the one who will save his people from their sins. Then Matthew offers an aside to his Jewish audience by referring to something the prophet Isaiah said: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'

And then Matthew translates that for his gentile audience: 'which means, "God is with us."'

Then Joseph wakes up, and does as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took Mary as his wife. And they decided not to consummate the marriage until after the child was born, which means – if Mary were indeed a virgin – they chose not to defend her honor – and his – by producing evidence of her virginity on the wedding night. Back when bloody sheets were displayed as proof of honor. They both chose not to defend their honor by waiting to consummate the marriage until after the baby was born. And Joseph named him Jesus, as he was told to.

There's a lot going on in this brief story that is problematic to our listening ears, twenty centuries removed from the various actions taken by the protagonists. It is deeply rooted in a patriarchal culture within a patriarchal empire, where women are acquired from their fathers with money or property, transferred from one man to another. Mary would have been ruined if Joseph hadn't acted as he did. As I'm sure countless women were in the first century. And in every century since. So, as I sat with this text this week – which I have never preached before – all of the problematic nature of the dynamics involved in this story were front and center in my mind. But while I was working on the liturgy for the Table, which includes the words we say every time we come to the Table, the mystery of faith: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again," I was struck by the thought that all of that is only true because Christ was born. The second person of the Trinity was conceived and born, needing the care of a mother. And the care of the man who would raise him as his own, about whom we know so very little.

But what Matthew insists we know is that Joseph was a righteous man. Someone to emulate. And what we know about Joseph is that he refused to act according to Jewish, Greek and Roman law, but instead acted with compassion for Mary – before the fact that this child was conceived of the Holy Spirit was revealed to him, or confirmed to him. His sense of justice, of righteousness was tempered by compassion. Something Matthew will portray Jesus doing time and time again throughout his Gospel. Which makes me wonder

how much of that Jesus learned from Joseph. That when Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us – stands in solidarity with “sinners,” he’s acting exactly as Joseph did with Mary.

When Jesus chose mercy over judgment, how much of that did he learn from Joseph?

When he protected women from the cruelty and spite of men, how much did he learn about that from Joseph?

And as I pondered those questions this week, I realized – sadly – why we know so little about Joseph – this ‘righteous man.’ Because even after Matthew introduces Joseph with those words, his actions fly in the face of patriarchal power, and so, his personal story is largely lost to history. We know all about King David – who committed sexual assault, adultery and murder all in the space of a few weeks. We hold up Samson as the strong man, who crushed his enemies with his strength. And the list goes on and on – all the stories that still get held up as examples of “biblical manhood.” Stories that feature heavily in the podcasts of ‘theobros’. All of which enable men to continue to do what men have always done: Defend the patriarchy. Defend that which has littered history with unnumbered victims of men who believe they can take what they want, when they want it, and cast women aside with impunity.

That was true in the first century. It is true in the twenty-first century.

And it appears to be undergoing yet another revival in certain corners of the church even now, and all I can do is lament for the harm that will be done in Jesus’ name, by men who have not learned what true strength, and honor and dignity involve.

So yes, we don’t know much about Joseph. Probably because he’s an embarrassment to “biblical manhood.” He didn’t defend his honor. He stood with Mary, and didn’t cast her aside. Angel visitation or not, he’d already determined to protect her honor best he could, and shame himself in the process. And, apparently, he raised a boy who became a man, who followed in those footsteps. Standing in solidarity with vulnerable women. Inviting them to become disciples. Humiliating himself by accepting their financial support. Sending them out as the first apostles.

This child, who became a boy, who became the man who would save his people from their sins. Joseph was a righteous man. Jesus must have learned from him. May we all learn from him – but especially, we men.

May it be so.

And amen.