

Sunday Sermon December 21, 2025

Well – we have arrived. We have arrived at the stable in Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph and an angel who delivered news that turned their lives upside down.

Last week Coleen pointed out that in the midst of all our planning and preparing for Christmas this time of year, we might come to church expecting to hear about angels and shepherds and Mary and Joseph. But up until now, our Advent Gospels have featured John the Baptist, the wilderness prophet, who proclaimed a message of repentance as he paved the way for the Messiah. Last week, we found poor John alone in a prison cell for speaking truth to power. Not very “Christmassy.”

But this week – finally – we have Mary and Joseph. And Joseph is the central figure in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth. We might be more familiar with Luke’s account since that’s the one we hear on Christmas. Luke’s account features Mary as the central figure. It’s Mary who is visited by the angel in Luke. It’s Mary who says “thy will be done” to God’s invitation to bring God’s Son into the world.

But in Matthew – the story we just heard – Joseph is the central figure. It’s Joseph who finds out that his betrothed, Mary, is pregnant, and so he decides to divorce her quietly.

It’s important to know that in ancient Palestine parents arranged their children’s marriage. The notion of marriage happening after 2 people fall in love and freely decide to wed is a thoroughly modern practice. In Bible times, marriage was a contract that was worked out between the father of the bride and the father of the groom.

The marriage contract hinged on the establishment of the “bride price” – the price the father of the bride would be compensated for losing a piece of property, his daughter. A dowry was established for this purpose.

Once the price was set and the fathers shook hands, the couple were legally bound, but they would continue to live with their parents until the marriage ceremony, after which the bride moved into the groom's house.

So Mary and Joseph were in this "betrothal" period when Joseph found out she was pregnant. According to the Law, any infringement of marital fidelity should be punished by divorce or even... death. Joseph, being a "righteous man" decides to divorce her quietly, not wanting to expose Mary to disgrace or even worse.

Joseph was a good man - his regard for the Law was superseded by his compassion and mercy. Joseph's instinct to quietly divorce her is an example of the kingdom values that Jesus came to proclaim and to usher in kingdom values: compassion, mercy and love are valued over strict adherence to the law.

But before Joseph could carry out the divorce, an angel showed up. A messenger from God came and appeared to Joseph in a dream and said "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." God is at work here. God is working through her and through you to come into the world in a whole new way, in the most deep, profound and tangible of ways. God's going to come as a baby who will grow up to be a man named Jesus, who is God in the flesh, Emmanuel, "God with us" every step of the way in the world here and now.

Now imagine for a moment what that might have been like for Joseph. He had plans. He was excited about marrying Mary and having a new life together, and then he finds out she's pregnant. He plans to do what he thinks is right and an angel shows up and says "God has other plans." Listen, trust and act.

Joseph. I love that Joseph is the central figure in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth because Joseph was able to do something that's very difficult to do. Joseph was able to resist believing that he was the center of the universe and that his plans, his wants, were the most important thing.

Joseph stepped aside and let someone else take over. He let God take over, and the world was forever changed by his willingness to listen, to trust and to

let God carry out the higher purposes that God intended for him and for the world.

Ruth Haley Barton notes: “Joseph had a plan – to put Mary away quietly – and it was a good plan. It came from a good place inside him. But it was still only a human plan that came from looking at the situation solely from a human perspective. The walk of faith required Joseph to wake up, to see his situation from the vantage point of what God was doing and to change his approach accordingly. This kind of relinquishment can be hard – the relinquishment of a plan that we have already mapped out in our heads.

For Joseph relinquishing his own plan was necessary if he was going to respond to the spiritual reality that was unfolding in the midst of this human drama. It required inner vision that enabled him to perceive far more than the human eye can see and comprehend. It called him to rise above his own pain and confusion to belief that “all this was taking place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” Ruth Haley Barton

God’s love was seeking to break into the world in Jesus. Joseph chose to not run from his part in this mystery but to embrace it and to be an instrument that would help to fulfill it. He was willing to set aside his fears, his plans, his desires, to help to usher in the coming Messiah.

What an example he sets for us today. We who can be so tempted to believe all the messages swirling around us that say: “you are the center of the universe,” your plans are what matter most, if you feel like you’ve been wronged, strike back with greater force. Show no mercy. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Today Joseph – dear Joseph – shows us what can happen when we open ourselves, open our heart, our life, to God’s love, which is constantly seeking to break into our world.

Amen