

We Need A Joseph

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Isaiah 7:10-16 (NRSV)

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, [11] Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. [12] But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. [13] Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? [14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. [15] He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. [16] For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

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.

WE HAVE NO JOSEPH

You might not believe this, but almost every year something goes wrong with our Christmas play. At that last minute we have to make some changes to fit our cast of characters.

This year we didn't have enough wise men. So we cast some of our adults in the part. Many of you have told me that putting the adults and the children together made the play more memorable and meaningful than ever before.

Who could have guessed that a change born of necessity would have made the play more meaningful?

A minister said that at last year's annual Christmas pageant, they faced a similar dilemma. On the night of the play, the director came running down the hall and blurted out, "We have no Joseph. We have no Joseph."

She went on to explain that the kid who was to play Joseph had a terrible bout of nausea just before he was to leave home and come to church. His mother had just called to say that he wouldn't be in the play. How could they put on the play without Joseph?

But, the minister was used to dealing with such problems. He said, "Let some shepherd stand sort of near the manger with Mary. Nobody will know the difference. Joseph doesn't even have a speaking part in the story."

The minister was right. A shepherd became Joseph, and no one even noticed. Anybody could play Joseph. Just tell him where to stand and what to do.

Sometimes when I read the stories about the birth of Jesus that seems to be true. Joseph is not given a speaking part. He plays the role of a carpenter.

JOSEPH AND US

I imagine Joseph as the strong silent type who works hard for his family and plays by the rules. He's a blue collar worker who takes pride in his work. He always measures twice and cuts once.

You know people like Joseph. Maybe you're like Joseph. You like an orderly planned life. You might not make much money, but you do the best with what you have. You appreciate the simple things in life, like the joys of family and friends.

Joseph had his dream. It was a simple dream. He just wanted a modest home, a white picket fence and the woman he loved.

It had all been planned long ago by his parents and her parents. He and Mary were promised to each other in marriage when they were just children. We might not understand an arranged marriage like this, but there was a certain comfort in knowing what you will do in life and whom you will marry.

Not long before the events in our lesson for today take place that promise was formalized in court. Except for the fact that they weren't living together as husband and wife, it was almost as if they were married already. It was time for such things. She was almost 15 years old; many thought that it was well past time for her to be married.

And Joseph had worked hard for this moment. Arranged marriages to girls from a nice family didn't come cheap.

DREAM INTERRUPTED

And then life throws this simple, hardworking man a curve. He finds out that his beloved is pregnant. The Bible tells us that she was "found to be with child by the Holy Spirit."

I'm not sure if Mary tried that explanation on Joseph or not. We don't get any details of how it all happened ... as much as our inquiring minds would like to know. We just know that Joseph knew, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to easily imagine the rest.

I don't know if you've ever gotten any news like that before. You work hard and play by the rules only to see your dreams fly out the window. And it's not because of anything you have done but it's because someone else made the wrong choice.

I don't know if you've ever had that lump in your throat and that sick feeling that comes when you find out that someone you love had been unfaithful. Some of you know how gut wrenching a revelation like this can be. It sounds so simple and innocent when the Bible talks about it. Mary was "found to be with child."

But, behind that simple phrase lies a world of hurt. Mary was pregnant. Joseph was devastated.

I know that today people don't think twice about someone being pregnant and not being married, but back then it was a big deal, a very big deal. In fact those that behaved in this way could even be put to death by stoning.

A RIGHTEOUS MAN

Joseph didn't want that. Joseph didn't want a messy divorce. (In those days in order to end this formal engagement period it was necessary to obtain the equivalent of a divorce.) Joseph just wanted out.

The Bible tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. And since Joseph was righteous he wouldn't stay with Mary. He didn't want people to think that he had done the wrong thing.

But, Joseph wasn't self-righteous. His integrity had a soft side. Mary had hurt him, but he didn't want to hurt Mary.

He would put her away quietly. He would find a few witnesses; they would cross over the border and get one of those quickie annulments in Los Vegas or Moab ... or some other place where no one knew them and no one cared. It would be as if it never happened.

He would swallow hard, sweep this unpleasant situation under the rug, and try to dream a new dream. Maybe he could find another woman, a faithful woman with whom he could share his life.

It wasn't his first choice. It wasn't the life that he had planned. But, it was the best that he could do.

What do they say? When life gives you lemons make lemonade. Joseph wanted to put this embarrassing situation behind him as soon as possible.

A FEARFUL PRESENCE

Joseph was acting out of fear. Joseph was afraid of what others might say and do. He was afraid that the mundane but satisfying life he had planned for himself would be taken away.

Even the most careful and conservative among us will thrash about wildly when we lose our anchor in life. And the more careful and conservative we are the more we will panic when it is obvious that our life is out of control.

We learn in our lesson for today that God is with us. That's good news, but that's also bad news.

When God comes near invariably our plans get put on hold, and our life gets turned upside down. We recognize in a personal way that God's ways are not our ways.

And our dreams are often shattered by the advent of God's presence.

That's how it was for Joseph.

Joseph's dreams were shattered when God came into his life.

A NEW DREAM

But that night God's angel gave Joseph a new dream. The angel greeted Joseph the same way the angel greeted Mary before him and the shepherds after him. The angel said, "Don't be afraid."

We find this same command hundreds of times in the Bible. It seems that fear is the big enemy of faith.

Fear rules our life and takes away hope. Fear limits our options. Fear tells us to run away, to sweep everything under the rug and hope no one notices.

But, the angel told Joseph, “Don’t be afraid ... don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

This is where Joseph’s story is totally unique. It has to be. This only happened once. It was the decisive moment in history when the word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the time when God reached down and touched us in a very human way.

When Mary first heard the news, she asked, “How can this be?” When Joseph first heard the news he said, “This can’t be.” But, the angel told both of them that they were wrong. They had been chosen by God to perform a very special role.

The child Jesus would be a fulfillment of prophecy. The virgin would conceive, and God’s people would receive a Savior. Sins would be forgiven. The whole world would never be changed. The whole world would be given a new dream.

A DREAM THE WORLD DOESN’T WANT

God has given us a new dream. But, by and large we don’t want that dream. We are entrenched in our own way of doing things.

Today’s Old Testament lesson, the prophecy from Isaiah that is quoted in Matthew, comes from a time of national crisis in the 8th century BC. Judah’s King Ahaz is afraid that his enemies will soon gain the upper hand.

But, Ahaz has a plan. He will elicit the aid of a stronger country. He will seek an alliance with Assyria.

Now this was a lot like the mice inviting the protection of the cat! But, that’s what King Ahaz did. He couldn’t believe in God’s promise of a Savior in a time of crisis. His own dream crowded out the promises of God.

We shouldn’t be too hard on Ahaz. We too tend to trust in questionable foreign alliances, weapons and financial strength instead of trusting in God. We read self-help books, and are obsessed with do it yourself projects.

And we tend to bring that same “can do” attitude to our religion.

But, faith is not a do it yourself project. Faith is not based upon self-help. Faith is not based upon our wisdom and our ability to make things happen.

Faith is about trusting in God’s choice and being obedient to God’s will.

OUR DREAM AND GOD’S DREAM

It takes courage to follow your own dream.

A lot of people spend their whole life in a dead end job because they are afraid to try something new. Many are afraid to risk everything in order to do what they really feel called to do. I bet there are a lot of people here this

morning who wonder what might have happened if they had followed their first love and taken the chance when the opportunity arose.

We are all prisoners of the choices we make in life. Every choice sets us on a path that excludes a thousand other choices. We often dream about what might have been.

But, the story of Joseph suggests that maybe our story is not exactly what we think it is. There is more to life than our own ambition. There is more to life than our private personal dreams and the path where those dreams take us.

Sometimes we find that God has a dream for us that is different from and greater than any dream we could possibly imagine.

Joseph and Mary played a unique role in salvation history, but I would suggest that in some ways we too are called to play a similar role. We too are called to dream a dream that is not of our own making. We too are called to proclaim a salvation that is above and beyond us.

Joseph and Mary are not the only ones called to obey God's will for their lives. Joseph and Mary are not the only ones to be called by God in a moment of crisis. Joseph and Mary are not the only ones to experience the coming of that Savior named Jesus.

In many different places and in many different ways the dream comes to us as well.

The angel of the Lord comes to us when we are discouraged and broken and embarrassed and says, "Don't be afraid. There's more to your life than you might imagine. I have a plan for your life. Let me rule your life instead of fear."

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

The Bible tells us that Joseph heard the angel's promise, and unlike King Ahaz he obeyed. Joseph did as he was told. He ignored the whispers and the sly looks. He took Mary as his wife amid all the false accusations. He did the right thing and Joseph was with Mary when the baby was born.

Joseph was indeed a righteous man, but Joseph proved to be more than a righteous man. Joseph was a faithful man.

Joseph (as it was said of Abraham) believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness; Joseph took God at His word. Just as Abraham was willing to follow God as God led him in the wilderness so Joseph was willing to take Mary as his wife.

It takes courage to follow our own dream.

But, it takes even more courage to follow God's dream. As Joseph found the courage to take Mary as his wife, we must find the courage to embrace the life that we have been given, and we must find the faith to perceive how God is at work in our lives ... as mundane and as unimportant as our lives might seem at times.

PRESENT TENSE

Walter Brueggeman points out that Jesus had two names. Jesus which means “he saves” and Emmanuel which means “God is with us”. The promise of both names is in the present tense. Today God is with us and today God saves.

One scholar put it this way, “When I was a child Christmas was a once upon a time ... now that I am an adult Christmas happens again and again and again.”

We need to have more adults in our Christmas pageant. We need more Christians who believe in the promise today. It’s not just about what happened long, long ago in a place far, far away. It’s about what is going to happen here and now.

Today God is with us. Today God saves. Can we believe that promise? Can we be obedient to God’s will?

WOULD YOU PLAY JOSEPH?

Our yearly pageant of the incarnation is about to begin, but we have no Joseph. We have no one who is willing to believe and act upon the promise.

I wonder.

Could you stand in for Joseph today?

It’s not that hard a part to play. Don’t be afraid. The angel will do all the talking, and God will do all the acting. All you have to do is go where you’re told to go and do what you’re told to do ... just like the Christmas plays you used to be in as a child.

Take your place. Go stand next to the manger.

The curtain is about to rise, and the drama is ready to begin.

All we need is someone to play the part of Joseph.

All we need is a faithful and righteous person who believes in God’s word more than they believe in themselves.

Maybe that someone could be you?

Amen.

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