

Let every hear – Joseph \* Matthew 1:18-25

December 10, 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

This Advent season we are thinking about how to make room for Jesus – how to let every heart prepare Him room. Last week we looked at Mary’s experience; this week we’re going to look at Joseph’s experience. Joseph is one of those strong and silent types; he doesn’t say much – I don’t think he says anything in the Bible! - but his actions speak louder than words.

So let’s go to Matthew chapter 1 to find out what he did when he found out that Jesus was coming. Matthew 1 starting in verse 18. And there are three ways here in this passage that I want to highlight where Joseph models making room in our hearts for Jesus. Matthew 1:18:

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph...

Let’s pause there because marriage in those days worked differently than it does today. When Julie and I got engaged, we went out on this lovely hike through the forest and then I got down on one knee in a clearing overlooking a lake and I said ‘will you marry me?’ Fortunately, she said ‘yes.’ At that point, we were ‘engaged.’ We were committed to each other to be married, but it wasn’t legal, it wasn’t official until we actually signed the papers on the wedding day – then we would be ‘married.’

If Mary and Joseph had done that, they wouldn’t have just been ‘engaged’ as they stood there by the lake; they would have been ‘betrothed.’ And where our ‘engagement’ is a serious but non-binding commitment, their ‘betrothal’ was a legal contract. At the point where Mary and Joseph were ‘betrothed,’ they were legally bound, so closely that to break the betrothal required a divorce. They weren’t married though; they would still live with their families, they would not do husband and wife things until they finally got married and Mary went to live with Joseph. That ‘betrothal’ period typically lasted for about year.<sup>i</sup>

But at some point in that year, back to verse 18, Mary was found to be with child...

Now listen, WE know that ‘she was found to be with child *through the Holy Spirit,*’ but as far as Joseph knows, that sentence ends with ‘Mary was found to be with child.’ And that’s not good. She may have TOLD him about the Holy Spirit but I suspect that he would be skeptical.

I remember back to my teaching days at Laurier; I’d say to a student ‘why isn’t your paper in on time?’ and they’d say ‘Well... I was on my way to my grandma’s funeral but then we got into a car accident and I got a concussion so I couldn’t remember my computer password and my printer was out of paper.’ And I’d say ‘yeah, sure.’

I’m sure Joseph was thinking the same thing. Yeah right.

If Mary was pregnant and he knew HE wasn’t involved then that means that Mary had been unfaithful to him or someone had taken advantage of her. And that’s a big deal, culturally speaking. I mean, imagine getting engaged to someone today and then three weeks later discovering they’re pregnant! That’s scandalous in our culture; imagine what it was like in Jesus’ way more conservative time. Mary’s family would probably want to send her away lest she bring shame to the family name and legally speaking, Joseph was bound to divorce her lest he been seen as profiting from this adultery.<sup>ii</sup>

And the Old Testament was pretty clear about what to do in this situation – Deuteronomy 22:23-24:

23 If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her,  
24 you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death... You must purge the evil from among you.

Now, existing records showed that the Jewish people didn't do that very often but the principle remained.<sup>iii</sup> If someone has been unfaithful out of marriage, you want nothing to do with them.

Well, verse 19 – Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and so he decided to divorce her.

He knew that this kind of sex outside of marriage was counter to God's good purposes for human thriving and so when he saw it apparently happening, he chose to do the right thing and break off the marriage.

And this I think is the first way that Joseph shows us to prepare our hearts for Jesus. He teaches us to act justly. He teaches us to act justly, to do the right thing.

Joseph was not willing to cozy up with sin; he was not willing to tolerate infidelity. His worldview was shaped not by popular opinion but by God's laws and decrees. So when it appeared that Mary had been unfaithful, he acted decisively to separate himself from her. He acted justly.

And I think that that's important for us too. When we really care about someone, it can be really easy to overlook their sin or sweep it under the rug. It can be easy to justify their lifestyle choices and say 'oh it's not really that big a deal.' If they run counter to God's holiness and righteousness, it IS a big deal. Our ethics and worldview need to be shaped by the God of perfect justice so that in every situation, no matter what happens, we act justly.

Now that being said, I left out a piece, didn't I?

Look at verse 19 again.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

This tells us two very important things about Joseph doesn't it? 1. He is a righteous man committed to acting justly but 2. He's also a merciful man. He's going to do the right thing but he's going to do it mercifully. 'He did not want to expose her to public disgrace' so 'he decided to divorce her quietly.'

Legally speaking, Joseph could have made a big deal of this. He could have hauled Mary up in front of the town and said 'this woman has been unfaithful' and exposed her to all kinds of ridicule. Technically speaking, since she (apparently) broke the betrothal commitment, Joseph would probably have been entitled to keep Mary's dowry because of her infidelity. And if they lived in a community that took Deuteronomy 22 really seriously, her life could have been in danger.

But Joseph did not want to drag her over coals and so he decided to handle the situation with mercy.

And again, this is a second way that we prepare our hearts for Jesus. We act justly, but we also love mercy. (You see where I'm going with this, right?). Joseph demonstrates for us the importance of justice tempered with mercy, of doing the right thing, in a compassionate way.

And again this is so important for us. When we interact with loved ones who are walking away from God, we need to call sin sin, but we need to treat them with love and compassion. We have all as 'sinners saved by the blood of Christ' received grace way beyond what we deserve; we need to extend that grace to others and prioritize mercy in the way that we treat other people. So yes, we need to do the right thing, but we also need to do the right thing with mercy.

So first, we act justly, second, we love mercy; let's keep going, verse 20:

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. [God finally lets Joseph in on what we've known all along].

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

God finally lets Joseph in on what we and Mary have known all along. This child is no ordinary child. This child is conceived by the Holy Spirit which means that this child is divine. This child is God in the flesh! And not only is this child the God-man, this child will save all mankind from their sin. This child will deliver us from the price of sin by dying on the Cross to restore us to the God we scorned. This child will fulfill the promises that God made in the OT to forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more.

That's Jeremiah 31:34 – the New Covenant God promised – but that's not the only OT passage that this child fulfills. Look at verse 22:

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."

In Isaiah's day, God promised a child who would symbolize God's victory over His people's enemies; now, God is saying, *this* virgin-born child represents God's greatest victory over our greatest of enemies – sin itself! Truly this proves that GOD IS WITH US – immanu (is with us) – el (God) – Emmanu-el – God is with us. God is for us. God Himself is taking the initiative to deal with our sin and restore us to Him. And this child is how He's going to do it. What a revelation!

Well now Joseph's alarm clock goes off and he's got a choice to make. This really struck me this year. Joseph has had this dream; he has heard God clarify what's going on with Mary and now he has a choice to make.

On one hand, he is well within his rights legally and culturally speaking to cut his ties to Mary and get on with his life. That's the most 'honourable' thing for him to do – he gets to save face and come off as the faithful husband let down by an unfaithful wife-to-be. If he just washes his hands of this whole thing, he gets off scot-free and actually comes off looking the better for it. His reputation as a righteous man is going to get a nice little bump.

But on the other hand, if he chooses to take God at His word, if he chooses to marry Mary and call her Son his own, then his reputation is going to take a huge hit. Trusting God that this child truly is the Saviour means that he's going to have to say that this child really is his. No longer will Joseph be the righteous man around town; as far as the neighbourhood gossips are concerned, he's an impatient suitor who couldn't keep his pants on. He will have to carry the shame of a premarital child for the rest of his life. And it's not even his child.

And what's more, he will be putting himself at the Lord's disposal for the rest of his life. This isn't just a decision that will affect him for the next week; this is a decision that's going to affect him for the rest of his life.

If this baby is going to save His people from their sins, it's gonna cost Joseph. I mean, just think about all the time and effort you put into your kids; imagine what it's going to take to raise the Saviour of the world! In the first two years alone, Joseph is going to have to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Jerusalem back to Nazareth and then into Egypt because the baby's life is in danger on foot – no minivans back then.

To do this, Joseph will be giving up his claim on his life, in order to see God's good and perfect will accomplished in his life.

What do you think he's going to do?

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. [I suspect that they probably bumped up the wedding and actually got married within a couple of days].

25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

He put God first and chose to do the will of God. He chose to make God's Son His own and to walk with God, wherever He went.

And that's our third point. We prepare our hearts by acting justly, by loving mercy and by walking humbly with our God. Micah 6:8.

Joseph put the will of God before his own, took up his cross and followed Him. He went where God called him; he did what God called him to do and in doing so, he became the earthly father and role model for our Saviour Jesus. I like what Frederick Bruner says about Joseph: "His hallmark is obedience – prompt, simple, unspectacular obedience."<sup>iv</sup> He walked with God day by day.

And that's vital for us too. As we prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming, it's important for us to walk humbly with our God, to go where He goes, to do what He does, to have our worldview and perspective and priorities shaped by HIS worldview and perspective and priorities. God may not take you to Egypt in the service of His Son, but He may take you across the street, into the neighbourhood, beyond your comfort zone. Joseph shows us that being a child of God is not inherently hard; it's simply going where He would go. It's walking humbly with your God.

Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. That's how to make room for Jesus.

To wrap things up, I want to share with you one final thought that really struck me this week. When Joseph woke up from that dream, he had a life-changing choice laying before him. Would he accept Jesus as his own? Would he claim this child that he knows technically is not his? To do so would take great humility, great selflessness. He would lay down his expectations for his firstborn and make the Son of God his priority. He would also find life and purpose and joy walking with God, walking face to face with Jesus every day.

What struck me this week is that that same choice lies before each of us. Will you claim Jesus as your own? Will you humbly and selflessly identify with the Son of God? Will you lay down your expectations in order to make the Son of God your priority? If you do, you will find life and purpose and joy walking with God, walking with Jesus day by day.

Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.

Let's pray.

For prayer: ask the Holy Spirit to help us to identify one situation where we need to act justly.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help us to act with mercy in that situation.

Ask the Holy Spirit to make us sensitive to God's movement that we might walk with Him.

All out of devotion to the Son of God – Emmanu-el.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Betrothal was not a promise to marry but the first stage of marriage. For girls, it could take place as early as twelve years of age (*Babylonian Talmud Yebamot* 62b). The betrothed couple did not live together until the marriage ceremony when they entered the wedding canopy and the marriage blessings were recited, and a year might pass before the woman moved to her husband's home (*Mishna Ketubot; Nedarim* 10:5; *Babylonian Talmud Ketubot* 57b). The betrothal could only be canceled by an official bill of divorce (*Mishna Ketubot* 8:1)." (David Garland, *Reading the New Testament: Matthew*, Commentary on Matthew 1:1-25, digital).

<sup>ii</sup> Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, 91.

<sup>iii</sup> Keener, 93.

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, 47.