

## **12-20-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 1: 28- 25 Forgotten Joseph**

Several years ago in early December, Rob and I were in Santa Fe, New Mexico, attending a conference on preaching. One of the worship services took place in the lovely Loretto Chapel that was built in 1878.

There is a legend about Loretto Chapel. When the Chapel was built, the architect forgot to include a way for the Catholic nuns to reach the choir loft that was 22 feet above the floor. The sisters weighed their options, but every option had real downsides. They could build a conventional staircase, but that would take up too much room. They could rebuild the balcony, but that would be far too expensive. They could climb a ladder straight up and down, but that would be an accident waiting to happen, especially as the nuns got older. What should they do?

In our scripture reading from the gospel of Matthew, Joseph faced a dilemma with similar impossible choices. We don't know a lot about Joseph; in fact, we will only see Joseph 3 times after Jesus' birth. He disappears right after Jesus turned 12. Joseph was a carpenter by trade and a devout Jewish man. Some say he was an older widower who died early, and Mary was perhaps his second wife; others think he was young like Mary. We find him most active around Jesus' birth- traveling with Mary to Bethlehem for the census, searching for a place for them to stay that Christmas night, and around the manger after Jesus was born. So Joseph is in every nativity scene, but he's almost always quietly standing, beside Mary who is kneeling. We learn from Luke a bit about what Mary was thinking that night, but not Joseph. Joseph always seems a bit to the back of the stable, along for the ride that God had Mary on. But is that the real Joseph?

Joseph was betrothed to Mary. The closest word we have today for betrothed is engaged, but being betrothed in Joseph's day was more than being engaged today. But we used to understand betrothed- how many of us remember when weddings included the couple saying the words, "With this ring, I plight thee my troth?" We understood that they meant "With this ring, I marry you." Betrothal, in Joseph's day meant the couple was legally married, even though the wedding had not taken place yet and the couple did not live together. If the betrothed couple

broke up, the woman didn't just give the ring back and they parted ways; betrothed couples who broke up went through a legal divorce.

When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant before the wedding, he knew the child was not his. He also knew there were only two other explanations for the pregnancy- Mary had either been raped or had been unfaithful with another man. Mary denied being raped or unfaithful; she said the child was from the Holy Spirit and would be the Son of God. An angel had told her so. There lay Joseph's dilemma.

Joseph could divorce her quietly with a written notice or he could humiliate her by divorcing her publicly in court. What should he do? He certainly didn't believe her story about the angel and the weird conception or he wouldn't have wondered what to do. He had the right to justice, to his pound of flesh in court because of Mary's betrayal. No one in town would blame him for doing so. It would soften some of the ridicule he would certainly receive when everyone found out he had been a sucker. What kind of man lets his betrothed get away with such a thing? But what about his dear Mary? Maybe he should divorce her quietly and walk away.

What do **we** do when we face situations where all our choices seem negative? Agonize. Overeat or over drink. Worry it over and over in our minds. Take it out on those we love. Procrastinate. Try to get someone else to make up our minds for us, asking, "What would you do?" I feel for Joseph. When faced with this dilemma, his best human reasoning could only see negative possibilities. Sound familiar?

I imagine Joseph tossing and turning in his bed that night with his decision weighing heavily on him. Justice or mercy? Mercy or justice? And into his restless dreams Joseph heard God's angel whisper God's resolution to his dilemma that his human reasoning could not find.

Rev. Alyce MacKenzie describes the angel's message poetically: "Joseph, here is the key that unlocks your dilemma. Believe {Mary's} unbelievable story. Marry her, and become the father of God's child. He will need a father to be accepted by others as he grows to manhood. He will need, not just any father, but a father like you, capable of nurturing him, and giving him a name. 'Immanuel -- God with us.'

- “He will need a father like you to teach him to take risks like the one you are about to take, for he will be tempted not to take them.
- “He will need a father like you to teach him to withstand the disapproval of others, just like you will soon have to withstand it.
- “He will need a father like you to teach him what to do in situations like this one, when all hope seems lost and only pain remains; to model how to believe the unbelievable good news and to walk ahead in faith.
- “Joseph, if you do not walk the hard road to Bethlehem, who will teach him how to climb the cruel hill to Calvary?”

Joseph awoke the next morning having been born into a father for God’s Son, and he took Mary as his wife, and Jesus as his adopted son.

I think it’s time to bring Joseph out of the back of the stable as though he was only a carpenter rather than the strong father God knew his Son would need. I want to change out these other Josephs for a kneeling Joseph because he was clearly a man of deep faith and courage. We learn from Joseph about facing difficult situations and decisions. When we face a difficult situation or decision, it’s natural to want an easy black and white answer. Divorce her quietly or divorce her publicly. Easy answers are usually the ones that require the least of us, that maintain the status quo rather than bring change, that cost us the least, that stretch our faith the least. That’s why they’re called... easy. Easy answers are seldom God’s answers of what’s best or right. Joseph chose the path of doing what God called him to do, crazy as it sounded, of trusting God with this baby, this marriage, his reputation, and his future, and because he did, God used Joseph to raise his Son to be the One who would one day give his life to bless the whole world. What a gift Joseph gave **us** when he said yes to God- the gift of seeing faith in action.

Remember the nuns of the Loretto Chapel and their impossible need of a staircase? The legend says that one night while the nuns were praying about their predicament, a white bearded stranger appeared at the door of the convent asking for work. A toolbox was strapped to his burro and he told the sisters he was a carpenter. When they told him their problem, he offered to a staircase- not a regular staircase, that would take too

much room, or a 22- foot tall ladder which would be too dangerous- he offered to build a spiral staircase. His spiral staircase was an engineering feat for its day, containing thirty-three steps and two complete turns of 360 degrees with no center support. He used wooden pegs instead of nails, and his only tools were a saw, a T-square, and a hammer. That staircase is still there today. As soon as the staircase was finished, he disappeared without asking to be paid. Is it just a legend or is God still using Joseph to build faith and courage in those who have eyes to see God's possible?

What difficult situations are we facing? Many decisions lie ahead in our lives and for this church. None of us know the future. Will we bemoan our impossible choices and depend on our human reasoning? Our best worrying and human reasoning alone will seldom find God's way. Only with the eyes of faith wide open, can we see God's possible. May we have Joseph-like faith- faith that takes time to listen for God to speak his wisdom before we act, faith that acts even when what God says sounds outrageous or is not what we planned, faith that trusts God for the unforeseeable future, come what may.

## BENEDICTION

The world out there is oversupplied with theories and technology, but drastically undersupplied with hope, peace, joy, or love. You however, like Joseph, are God's people, those who know the future is pregnant with promise. Go in faith and serve the Lord.