

“Who is this Messiah: The Lens of Love”

Matthew 1:18-25

December 20, 2020

Each year, on a Sunday afternoon just before Thanksgiving, the children of Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina would gather in the sanctuary pews with anxious anticipation for the parts to be distributed. Even though my father was the director, I was just as clueless as any of my peers as our names were called and roles were given for the annual Christmas pageant. But, like all of my classmates and friends, I was hoping (praying, really) for anyone but Joseph. *No one* wanted to be Joseph. For starters, you had to endure the ridicule of being “married” to one of the girls your own age. We knew just enough to be dangerous, and so this produced all kinds of taunts and teasing of Joseph. But more importantly, when Nancy Cox and her crew of volunteers led us to the costume closet, Joseph got a raw deal. Wise men got the coolest props—treasure chests and ornate bottles of elixir. Shepherds got to hold staffs and have swordfights offstage. Angels had the glitter and stars. Even the animals got interesting costumes with floppy ears and tails. Joseph got a bathrobe and a spot to stand, and that was it. Not even a line to speak. Joseph was boring, a passive observer of the story, already in place behind the donkey when the shepherds arrived, in the shadows while the spotlight lit up the manger a few inches away.

The kids at Vandalia weren’t alone in their assessment. Luke barely mentions Joseph in his exhaustive Christmas story. The truth is, without this morning’s verses from Matthew’s Gospel, we would know almost nothing about the human father of Jesus. Even with this story, we are missing many important details and subtext. The text moves quickly from one action to the next, with no pause to consider the emotional impact.

Here’s what we do know: Mary and Joseph

are engaged to be married; according to the First Century Jewish custom, their engagement is a binding contract between their families. A kind of arranged marriage. And so, though the couple does not yet live together, they are legally bound to each other. During this engagement period, any contact would have been strictly limited and carefully arranged. Thus, when Matthew matter-of-factly reports that Mary, “was found to be with child,” we are left wondering who delivered this news to Joseph and how it was received. When we encounter Joseph in Matthew’s first chapter, he knows nothing of Gabriel’s visit to Mary or the angel’s stunning message. He only knows that his fiancée is expecting, and he is not the father. The news must have been shocking and devastating. Still, despite the heartbreak and pain, Joseph is prepared to do the righteous thing. Not the legal thing, but the action that feels right in his own heart and mind. He will not publicly accuse or condemn Mary. He will quietly and privately allow her to go her own way. It is a response of restraint and of mercy, one that preserves Mary’s dignity and perhaps her life. Though the practice had been moderated, the legal code of Leviticus authorized stoning for the violation of a marriage contract. And so, we learn from his actions that Joseph is a man of compassion.

I can’t imagine that he was sleeping much those days, but somehow, he manages to doze off and this is when the angel appears. It’s important to note that Joseph did not expect what came next. How could he? We who have heard the story before know the next verse, but Joseph was living it in real-time. Angel visits were rare even in scripture and who can rely on a dream? The angel calls Joseph by name (“Son of David”) and begins with the typical divine

introduction, “Do not be afraid,” before describing what has happened and what Joseph must now do.

And here’s one miracle that sometimes gets lost in the shuffle and left out of the pageant—Joseph believes the angel’s incredible news and follows his bewildering command. I understand how we miss it. Matthew records the chain of events as if they were the most natural response in the world to a message received in a dream: *Joseph woke up, took Mary as his wife, kept his distance for several months, she gave birth to a son, and Joseph named him Jesus.* Now hold on a minute. Rewind the tape and change the lens. Zoom in on Joseph for just a moment before we get to the manger. Contemplate the courage it took to trust and follow the inconceivable instructions of this unexpected messenger. This week, this final Sunday before the sacred day arrives, we remember that Christmas was possible because an ordinary man chose to risk it all for the sake of love.

A friend and fellow preacher writes, “Study religious art, and Joseph is sometimes portrayed as an old man betrothed to a younger Mary. I don’t know about that, but I know that Joseph reads the Bible like he has some years behind him. Joseph learns something that too many religious folks never figure out. He learns that the only way to read the Bible is through a lens of love. That’s where the light shines... this child is God’s son, but God desperately wants Joseph to be this child’s daddy. Just as God chose Mary to be this child’s mother, God chooses Joseph to raise his son: to teach him carpentry; to take him to synagogue; to teach him how to read scripture; and to teach Jesus how to stand tall when the world falls apart. Jesus is going to need to know how to do that. I can’t help but think that when the world was falling apart for Jesus, it helped him to have had a daddy who knew how to choose love.”ⁱ

Scripture lacks details, but I like to imagine what Joseph was thinking when he held his son for the first time when he spoke the name that the angel had given him. Jesus. At the birth of a baby, a father is born as well. I will never forget the first moment each

of our sons was placed in my hands or the first words I spoke to them. *May you always know, and never doubt, how deeply loved you are.* So it was when Jesus was born—Joseph who chose to see the unimaginable through the lens of love begins the journey of loving that child, of giving the best he has and the most he can. The promise of love made in a dream is kept in the moment when the eyes of infant and father meet for the first time. At that moment, Joseph must have known that he made the right choice, the only choice love could make.

Several years ago, I was introduced to a relatively new Christmas anthem that has an unconventional focal point. The title is “The Hands That First Held Mary’s Child.” Written by Yale Divinity School professor Tom Troeger, the song gives Joseph the starring role in the pageant. The second stanza is so moving:

“When Joseph marveled at the size
of that small breathing frame
and gazed upon those bright new eyes
and spoke the infant’s name
the angel’s words he once had dreamed
poured down from heaven’s height
and like the host of stars that beamed
blessed earth with welcome light.”ⁱⁱ

I’m glad that Matthew didn’t allow us to skip by Joseph. I think this story reminds us that God needs ordinary people like you and me to choose love even when it is difficult, to accept the unexpected, and trust God’s surprising plan. In fact, I wonder if that old angel is still hanging around; I wonder if God is still looking for people to whom he can give his son; I wonder if the invitation to choose love might be extended to us this very week.

It was 2011, Christmas Eve in Atlanta. Sara and I were enjoying a quiet morning though my nervous energy about preaching on this holy night for the very first time was growing by the moment. Just before noon, our doorbell rang. We certainly weren’t expecting anyone but lived just a few yards

from the MARTA station, so had occasional visits from strangers. Sara opened the door to find a young couple, maybe in their late teens. The man held a rake in his hands and the woman was holding closely a baby who could not have been more than a few months old. They were not dressed warmly enough to keep out the cold that day, but they had hopeful looks on their faces. The young man lifted up his rake and said, “I noticed you have lots of leaves in the yard. Maybe I could rake them for you today?” How could we say no? Feeling slightly frustrated by this unexpected interruption and the time it was taking from us, I watched as Sara graciously invited the woman and baby into our home and found her something warm to drink. The woman pointed to one of our Christmas decorations, a series of letters spelling “PEACE,” and commented on how good it made her feel to see that word. Two hours later, when I left for a full afternoon and evening of services, Sara was packing up clothes and food to send with our new friends as they walked back out into the cold on that holy afternoon. As I was driving to church, tears began to fall. My heart knew before my brain understood what had happened to us. This young family’s unscheduled arrival was an opportunity to experience the meaning of Christmas in a whole new way and I had almost missed it. In their grateful words and anxious eyes, Sara had sensed an unexpected blessing. She had seen them through the lens of love. She opened the door.

This week, in the midst of all your preparations, Christmas will come, with the promise of vulnerable love...the God of the universe held in the trembling hands of a brave and anxious father.

Trust God’s promise. Find the courage to faithfully answer God’s call.

Let Joseph be your guide. Choose to see it all through the lens of love. Amen.

ⁱ Rev. Tom Are, “God in the Ordinary.” Sermon preached at Village Presbyterian Church, 12/20/15.

ⁱⁱ Thomas H. Troeger, “The Hands That First Held Mary’s Child,” http://www.hymnary.org/text/the_hands_that_first_held_marys_child