

## FACES AT THE MANGER

### *Joseph: The Eyes of Love*

Matthew 1:18-25

December 22, 2024

Here's the scene. It's the Sunday before Thanksgiving, circa 1992. The children of Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, have gathered in the sanctuary pews at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, anxiously awaiting their assignments for the annual Christmas pageant. And the good news is that each possibility has a certain promise. The wise men get the best props—treasure chests, bottles of potion. Shepherds draw the staves, which are perfect for backstage swordfights. *If you know, you know.* Angels, obvious—halos, wings. Even the animals get floppy ears and tails to wag. Then there's Joseph. When his name is called, every boy's eyes hit the floor. No one wants Joseph. For starters, and perhaps most importantly, you had to endure the ridicule of being "married" to one of the girls your own age. That alone was enough to put us on edge. But the truth is, Joseph gets a raw deal all the way around. No props, no staff, no wings, no tail. Ratty old bathrobe. Single spot to stand stuck in place for the whole show. That's it. Not one line to dramatically deliver. Joseph is dull. Boring. At best, a detached observer in this story, standing still while the shepherds and magi moved across the stage, arrive, present their gifts. Joseph, cast in shadows while the spotlight illuminates the manger and mother only a few feet away. I understand that a solution was brought forth a few weeks ago among our four- and five-year-olds in Sunday school when the part for Joseph was accepted by no one. Two Marys! That works.

You might say it's been this way from the very beginning. After all, without these eight verses from Matthew's Gospel, we would know almost nothing about the man, and what we do have here is lamentably lean. We are missing so much. Matthew's

text moves quickly from one action to the next. There is no pause to consider the emotional impact or the inner thoughts. The spotlight never pauses on Joseph. Not one line for him to deliver.

Here's what we do know. Joseph is engaged to be married. According to First Century Jewish custom, engagement is a binding contract, not between two individuals, but between two families. So, though the couple does not yet live together, they are legally bound to each other by contracts signed by their parents. During this time, their contact would have been limited, public, and carefully arranged. So when Matthew, the Gospel writer, flatly reports that Joseph's fiancée "was found to be with child," the passive voice leaves me with some unanswered questions. Found by whom? Who delivered the heartbreaking message to Joseph? How was it received?

Imagine the look on Joseph's face. Remember: he knows nothing of Gabriel's visit to Mary. That's over in Luke's Gospel. All Joseph knows here is that his fiancée is expecting, and he is definitely, 100% not the father. The news must have been shocking. Perhaps *devastating* is the word we need. What will he do? Matthew drops a clue. He tells us that Joseph is a good man. To be more specific, Joseph is a law-abiding man. A just man. A righteous man.

Well, what is the right thing to do for this righteous man? I imagine that Joseph turned to the pages of scripture, that he looked up the just, legal path ahead. After all, you can't go wrong if you do what the Bible says to do, right? Well. Deuteronomy 22. "She is to be taken to the gate of the town and stoned to death." That's what the Bible says. Exodus 21. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That's what the Bible says.

Deuteronomy 24. "If a man finds something displeasing in his wife, let him dismiss her and send her out of the house." It's in the Book. That's what the Bible says.

For several years, I've been in the habit of rereading classic novels each summer, and it's been a wonderful way to rediscover these literary masterpieces at a new chapter in my life. Two summers ago, I returned to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was struck by Miss Maudie Atkinson, one of Maycomb County's unheralded saints. In the story, Miss Maudie is much maligned by the "foot-washing literalists" who believe that her beautiful flower garden distracts her from the study of scripture. After all, how could one have such a beautiful flower bed and spend the appropriate amount of time studying the Bible? The town's children learn by experience that Maudie lives her faith with acts of love...and lots of patience for kids who play in those flowerbeds. When the children ask her about the dissonance between what they hear about her in town and what they see for themselves, Miss Maudie says, "Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of another... There are just some kind of men who are so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results."<sup>i</sup>

Joseph knows his Bible. He loves his Bible. He is a good man. A righteous man. He knows what the scripture says. And then he is faced with this excruciatingly difficult decision—his commitment to righteousness challenged by the tug toward mercy. What will he do? Joseph makes a choice. He reads his Bible through the lens of love. He believes in a God who is merciful. And so, Joseph says, "I will not harm her. I will not expose her. I will not abuse her, shame her, ridicule her. I will not demean her value, her dignity, her worth. I will protect her." And friends, this too is in the Bible. It is in the very nature and the character of God. The goodness and the grace of God. The steadfast and unconditional love of God. And that's how Joseph reads his Bible.

And, it seems to me, that's why Joseph is chosen for the part. It seems that way because as soon as he makes up his mind, as soon as Joseph chooses to risk disobedience to the law for the sake of mercy, that's when his angel appears. It happens in the quiet of night, backstage, in a dream. *Do not be afraid. This child belongs to God. Name him Jesus. Be his father.* And Joseph, this good man, this righteous man, this just man, does exactly what the angel commands.

And that's why, months later, Joseph is standing by when Mary delivers her baby. Joseph may not be in the spotlight, but he knows where he stands and why he's there. He names the child. Jesus. And from that day forward, he responds to the angel's call. Joseph will be this baby's father. He will teach Jesus. He will care for his son, show him how to be a carpenter, a builder of homes, a crafter of tables. He will no doubt walk with Jesus to the synagogue and sit beside him. He will teach his son to be a good man. He will beam with pride when Jesus stands to read scripture in the synagogue. He will comfort Jesus when he is afraid of the dark or sounds in the night. He will celebrate his triumphs and successes. He will watch his son grow in stature, and wisdom, and grace. And Joseph will be right there in a supporting role. He never forgets the angel's words.

Joseph's story offers us a powerful picture of love. It looks like living with compassion. It looks like acting out of mercy. And it looks like taking responsibility.

Back in October, Sara was leading a retreat up in New York, and it was just the two boys and me from Sunday to Wednesday. That's four days. And we did great...for the first day and a half. On Monday, I got home from the office, and I realized that I had not made any plans for dinner that night. Or breakfast the next morning. Or any other meal for the rest of the week. It was painfully obvious that we needed to make a grocery store trip and equally obvious that none of us wanted to go. It was pouring rain when we got into the car, hungry and tired, a dangerous combination. And we made our way to the store. I was determined to get in and out as

quickly as possible, but the layout of Market District and our two boys had other ideas. What would happen is they would go to some distant corner of the store I didn't even know existed, and they would reappear periodically with some item we didn't need and shouldn't buy. My patience was wearing thin when I looked over and saw a man in the cereal aisle pushing a cart with two toddlers in it. Incredibly, miraculously, he had a smile on his face. In fact, it was worse than that. He was singing these silly songs to the kids as he walked, practically danced, down the aisle. I had to know more. I walked over, and the first thing I noticed was his t-shirt. In huge print, the shirt read, "I'm not the stepdad. I'm the dad that stepped up." In our brief conversation there in the breakfast cereal aisle, I learned enough. He shared the unexpected nature of this new responsibility. "Not part of the plan," he said. And then the man said, "I just feel so blessed. Only God could have done this. These kids needed me, but the truth is I needed them more."

I'm glad Matthew didn't let us forget old Joseph. Joseph standing outside the spotlight. Joseph in a supporting role. He has something important to ask us in these final days before the celebration. Joseph knows that a moment will come when you must choose between human righteousness and God's astounding grace. Yes, Joseph knew the rules. And he knew what mattered more. Compassion. Mercy. Responsibility. Joseph sees with the eyes of love. He steps up, and he asks this Christmas: will you do the same?

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<sup>i</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.