

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/18/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 1:18-25**

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### The message of Joseph

The Fourth Sunday in Advent is associated with love. This is the final Sunday before Christmas and the lectionary for this year gives us a glimpse of the Nativity through the eyes of Joseph. Of all the characters closely associated with Jesus, Joseph is somewhat of an exception - nothing he ever said is recorded in Scripture. Despite the lack of his words, he has much to tell us. In digging into the text this week, we gain much insight into the mind and heart of Joseph and the role he played in the story leading up to Jesus' birth. Joseph shows us how love triumphs over anger, fear, and disappointment. Joseph shows us how it is possible to be both righteous and compassionate.

#### Matthew 1:18-25 Commentary

*<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

In v.18 we read how Mary was betrothed to Joseph yet in the very next verse of how Joseph resolved to divorce her. To fully appreciate the relationship between Mary and Joseph, it is necessary to understand the mechanics behind Jewish marriages. According to Barclay, three steps were involved. First, the couple were engaged. This may have happened when the one or both were children. It was arranged by the parents or a professional matchmaker. Neither of the couple were involved in this step and had likely never met each other. Second, the couple were betrothed. This was the ratification of the engagement which the couple had previously entered into. At this stage the girl could have broken the engagement if she was unwilling to go on with it. The betrothal was absolutely binding, and it lasted for one year. During this year the couple were known as man and wife but did not have the rights that came with marriage. The only way to terminate a betrothal was through divorce. Finally, the couple were married at the end of the year of betrothal.<sup>1</sup>

The text is clear that Mary and Joseph were in the betrothed phase of the process and thus Mary and Joseph would not have been intimate with each other. Imagine Joseph's shock when Mary told him she was pregnant. The only conclusion he could make is that Mary had committed adultery. We read in v.19 how Joseph was a "just man" (ESV), a "righteous man" (NASB) and "faithful to the law" (NIV). Regardless of any personal feelings he had

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New Daily Study Bible*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 18-19.

for Mary, Joseph, as a Law-abiding Jew, had no alternative but to divorce her. Failing to do so would have ruined his reputation and the reputation of his family. However, exposing Mary to a public trial would have resulted in her shame and humiliation. Joseph could have divorced Mary quietly in a less public way which would have avoided much of the shame and humiliation to Mary. This strategy would have risked Joseph's reputation and he would not have been able to recoup any financial loss without a public trial. Clearly, Joseph must have experienced much tension, and this reveals much about Joseph's heart. We read how Joseph resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Joseph thus put the law and his concern for Mary above his own interests. Through this decision, Joseph demonstrated he was both righteous and compassionate.

*<sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

Evidence for this tension Joseph experienced is perhaps found in v.20. We read how Joseph "*considered*" (or "*pondered*" in some translations) the situation. While this outwardly gives the impression of Joseph rationally and carefully weighing his options, the word rendered as "*considered*" is from the Greek word *enthymēthentos* which is made up of *en*, "in a state or condition," "intensifying" and *thymós*, "passionate response." Joseph may well have been very agitated, in a passionate frame of mind, agonizing over his strong, conflicting emotions.

In this same verse an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and confirmed Mary's own story.

*<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

The angel also provided some other instructions and quoted from Isaiah 7:14. In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, there was not a specific word for virgin. The word used, *'almah*, refers to a young woman of childbearing age. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the Greek word used, *parthenos* (a clear implication of a virgin), left no doubt to the meaning implied by *'almah*. In Matthew's text, the Isaiah prophecy cited also features the Greek *parthenos*.

The final verse of the text demonstrates the continued righteousness of Joseph.

### Reflection

As the Fourth Sunday of Advent marks the final approach to the birth of our Savior, the love present in the broader Nativity story is undeniable. First, we see love at the divine level - "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). Second, we see love at the human level that somehow manages to overcome a complex, law-based culture. The Gospel of Matthew demonstrates how Joseph was both righteous and compassionate who put the interests of others ahead of his own.

This year, as we approach the day dedicated to celebrating our Savior's birth, we see much of the remaining church falling into two major camps. On one side, there are those denominations who focus on personal and communal righteousness. Critics argue this comes at the expense of compassion and justice in the present. On the other side, there are those denominations who focus on compassion and justice in the temporal world. Critics argue this comes at the expense of an emphasis on eternal salvation and results in a church that conforms to the worldly morality of the day. Joseph, a simple carpenter, demonstrated how it is possible for each of us to take the

middle ground. We can focus on righteousness while still standing for compassion and justice. Perhaps this is the message for our time.



### Application

- What thoughts, feelings, images, or ideas did you experience while reading this text?
- Where do you see God's love in the world today?
- How do you experience God's love in your life?
- How do you reflect God's love to others?
- When you look at the decision that Joseph agonized about, what might be an equivalent situation in our culture today?
- Can you think of a situation in your life where you have witnessed someone standing for both righteousness and compassion?
- What action does this text call you to take this Advent and Christmas?



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