

The Faith of Joseph
A Sermon on Matthew 1:18-25 and Isaiah 7:10-16
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2022

Introduction

Luke's Christmas story is so familiar to us. The shepherds keep watch over their flock by night. The angel of the Lord brings good tidings of great joy. The heavenly host sings Glory to God in the highest. Mary wraps the baby Jesus in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger. The most famous Christmas carols have been written about Luke's story: *Away in a Manger, O Come, All Ye Faithful, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, The First Noel, Angels We Have Heard on High.*

We hear Luke's Christmas story every Christmas Eve, and we'll hear it again this Christmas Eve. Today we will hear Matthew's Christmas story. It's much less familiar. How many Christmas carols do you know about Joseph and the angel who appears to him in a dream? Don't say the wise men. They don't come until Jesus is a toddler, perhaps as much as two years later. The wise men are celebrated on Epiphany, when the light comes into the world.

The birth of Jesus is mentioned in passing in the last verse of today's Scripture. Matthew's story focuses on the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of Joseph. God wants to do great things but needs a person's help to do it. Matthew's Christmas story has a beauty of its own. It's about what God can do with a man of great faith.

First Move: The Lack of Faith of Ahaz

At the heart of Matthew's story is a quotation from Isaiah 7. It is today's Old Testament reading; Mary just read it for us. It is a story about the faith, or lack of faith, of King Ahaz, who was a descendant of King David.

The story dates back to the Syro-Ephraimitic war in 733 B.C.E. The northern kingdom of Israel, which was often referred to as Ephraim, the largest tribe, and Aram-Damascus (in present-day Syria) were vassal states of the Assyrian Empire. They tried to break away and force Judah and its king Ahaz to join their rebellion. Ahaz refused and instead called Assyria to intervene. This Assyria did with devastating effect, ultimately destroying Ephraim in 722 B.C.E. That was the end of the Northern Kingdom and resulted in the scattering of the 10 lost tribes of Israel into the Diaspora, never to be reunited again.

The story takes place when Ahaz is deciding how to respond to the threat of Ephraim and Syria, before he appeals to Assyria to intervene. Isaiah says that the heart of Ahaz and the heart of the people shook as Syria and Ephraim mounted an attack against them. Ahaz is foolish. He is appealing to a greater threat (Assyria) against a lesser threat (Syria and Ephraim). He is sticking his head in the mouth of a tiger.

David received an unconditional promise from God in 2 Samuel 7 that the House of David would endure on the throne forever. Each of the Davidic kings would be a son to God, and God would be a father to them. The House of David could rest secure in God's steadfast loyalty. Ahaz is an heir to this promise, but now in a time of panic and threat, Ahaz considers alternate arrangements for security.

God tells Isaiah to go out to meet Ahaz and tell him not to let your heart be faint because of Ephraim and Syria, which God refers to as two smoldering stumps. Isaiah invites Ahaz to show courage in the face of these two burned-out stumps.

Ahaz rejects God's offer to show a sign. Kings often looked for a sign before going into battle. Isaiah says that God will give him a sign anyway. Isaiah points to a young woman who is pregnant already. He says that before the child can tell right from wrong, around age 2, the two enemies attacking Ahaz will be destroyed. The child's name is Emmanuel, which means God with us. In this context, it means God will protect us.

The identity of the young woman is not important. Whether she is a virgin is not important or relevant for the sign of Isaiah. The focus is not on the birth but on the assurance that in two years Israel will no longer face a threat of war but will live in peace and prosperity. The child is a visible, concrete reassertion of the core conviction of royal Israel that God is present and will aid Israel as defender and guardian. Ahaz need not be afraid and turn to the savage resources of Assyria.

Unbelievably, Ahaz refuses God with us and chooses instead to conduct policy without God. The unborn child is a visible summons to faith that Ahaz has completely abandoned. Ahaz is the embodiment of fickleness, unfaithfulness and foolishness. He does not believe that God will protect him and calls in Assyria anyway.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann interprets this story to mean that faith is not a matter of cognitive belief but of practical reliance upon the assurance of God in a context of risk where one's own resources are not adequate. It means to entrust one's security and future to God. Faith is critical in times of conflict, threat and danger. Times like these are a true test of faith.

Ahaz is not called to a spiritual enterprise but to a concrete public action as king that proceeds on the conviction that God stands at the center of the crisis and

will prevail. Faith is a matter of life and death, war and peace in the real world. Faith is not a churchy thing but is a basis for radical action.

Unfortunately in the long history of the church, even today in evangelical circles, faith has been transformed into belief instead of trust (reliance). Those who enforce right belief are all too often unwilling to engage in deep trust.

Second Move: The Righteous Faith of Joseph

Matthew contrasts the faith of Joseph with the faith of Ahaz. Joseph is a model of righteousness and faithfulness.

Before the angel appears, Joseph acted compassionately toward Mary instead of judgmentally. Mary is betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal is an ancient custom that we don't practice anymore. Most of the marriages in those days were arranged by the parents. Betrothal is a marriage contract that the parents of the couple enter into. The betrothed woman continues to live with her parents and does not move in with her husband until the wedding ceremony, usually about a year later. Betrothal gives the man legal rights over the woman. During the interim, the woman is considered the wife of the man. A betrothal can be dissolved only with a certificate of divorce.

The text says "after she was betrothed to Joseph," but "before they came together." Mary has not yet moved into Joseph's home. The text calls Joseph "her husband."

Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. There is no Greek word for pregnant in the New Testament. The Hebrew expression is "having in womb."

Joseph does not know that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the child. He can only assume that Mary has been unfaithful to him.

Deuteronomy 22:23-25 sets forth the Jewish law on adultery. It says that if a virgin is engaged to be married and she lies with a man in town, both the virgin and the man shall be stoned. The idea is that people in town would have heard her cry for help if she was virtuous and tried to resist.

The first thing that Matthew tells us about Joseph's character is that he is righteous. That is the highest compliment Matthew can give a person. Righteous means you are in right relationship with God, that you are obedient to God's will. Jews believe that God's will is revealed in the Torah, the law.

Fred Craddock says that Joseph reads the law through the lens of grace and mercy because he believed that is what God is like. Joseph decides to obey the law by divorcing Mary, but he will not bring charges against her and publicly humiliate her.

This is a merciful response. Anger comes more easily to the rest of us than mercy. Many of us lash out in anger when someone close to us hurts us. We believe that our lover is rejecting us by being intimate with someone else. It makes us feel small.

Joseph is secure. His self-esteem is not threatened by the news that Mary is pregnant. No matter how much he may love Mary, it is his religious obligation to end the marriage contract. Joseph does not want to punish Mary, but he does not condone what she did. He decides to dismiss her quietly. He does not want to shame her by seeking a public trial for adultery.

Joseph is “reflecting on these things,” when he has a dream. The receiver of dreams was considered to be an especially spiritual or powerful person. People believed that God communicated with people through their dreams. The most prominent person to have dreams in the Old Testament is another Joseph, the one with the multi-colored coat.

An angel appears in the dream to Joseph. The angel addresses him as “Joseph, son of David.” Joseph is important to God’s plans. Jesus will not be recognized as a son of David unless Joseph acknowledges Jesus as his son. Matthew believes that God will honor the ancient promises to David through Jesus.

The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary into his home. You will not be violating God’s will. The angel reveals to Joseph that “what has been begotten in her is from [the] holy spirit.”

Begotten is another word we don’t use much today either, except when we hear it in church. It means to father someone. You are borne by the mother and begotten by the father.

Jesus is begotten from the holy spirit. We should not think of this as sexual union between Mary and the Holy Spirit. The spirit is feminine in Hebrew and neuter in Greek. Jesus is not a hybrid of man and God but a product of God’s creative activity through the Holy Spirit. Matthew has an Old Testament conception of the Holy Spirit as a vehicle of divine power. The spirit creates baby Jesus and rests the baby in Mary’s womb.

The spirit is the catalyst of the new throughout Israel’s history. God is making a radically new beginning with Jesus. This is the story of the genesis of Jesus.

Joseph is totally obedient to the angel’s commands: he takes Mary as his wife and he names the child Jesus. He is even more righteous than the angel commands: he does not know Mary intimately until she gives birth to the child.

We have to give Joseph credit. How many people act on their dreams? Or even remember their dreams? Joseph understood his dream as a sign from God and acted

decisively on it. It took courage for Joseph to act on the dream. He believed that the child in Mary's womb was a son of God and not the son of a paramour. He was opening himself up to being publicly ridiculed for accepting an illegitimate child as his own.

The child in Mary's womb is not a violation of God's will but an expression of it. Joseph is given a new commandment, a new and higher law, and urged to a new and higher righteousness. Joseph stands at the beginning of Matthew's gospel as the prototype for a higher righteousness and faithfulness.

The climax of the story is not the birth of Jesus, but Joseph's naming the baby as Jesus, which means he will save the people from their sins. Because Joseph is faithful, God is with us through the child and saves us from our sins.

Third Move: A Test of Our Own Faith

God can do more with people when they are responsive. What would have happened to God's plan if Joseph woke up and forgot about his dream? God can do more with people who make compassion a daily practice. What if Joseph was cold instead of compassionate? What if Joseph had said, "No, I'm not going to expose myself to the possibility of being ridiculed?"

Compassion is a spiritual practice. It requires patience. We are an impatient society. We are always in a hurry. Our time is valuable. We can't let anyone else waste our time. The theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, "We live by slowing down and saying with our lives that the world will not be saved by frantic activity." We have too much going on in our lives. [I'm preaching to myself here.] We work too hard. We have to work long hours to support our lifestyles. We need to slow down and make room for God in our lives. It's hard to listen for that still small voice when you're busy working or you're busy running errands. We need to change our perspective. Instead of working to pay the bills, we need to think of ourselves as working to give ourselves the free time to do what's really important. Spending time with our families. Volunteering to do mission activities that are meaningful.

It's hard to be compassionate when you're stressed and impatient. You can't help somebody if you always feel like you have other things to do. Time is wasting. I need to be productive.

Compassion requires listening. We don't have time to listen to other people. We cut them off as soon as it is polite. It's much more important that they hear what we have to say than that we try to understand them. [I'm preaching to myself again.] Compassion means having the humility to hold back your own opinions. You're not

trying to convert them. You're trying to open yourself up to them. You're trying to look at the world from their perspective.

Compassion makes it easier for us to trust God. We opening ourselves up to God and listening for God's call instead of believing that we are self sufficient.

Trusting God means trusting other people. We are not afraid to be vulnerable with people who have proven that they are worthy of our trust. We trust that they will not take advantage of us, that they will listen to us and try to help us if we ask for help.

We trust God when it counts, when we are at a crossroads. Like right now.

We are talking to another congregation about coming together as one congregation. We each will have to give up some control for it to work.

It is important that we get to know each other pretty well so that we can trust each other. I encourage you to attend some of their worship services. They begin worship at 9:30 and end by 10:45. They are meeting in Solo's Park and Pub at Memorial and Western, about 10 minutes south of here. You can go to their service and get here a little late, or leave there a little early and get here when we start at 10:45. When some of their members come here to attend worship, visit with them afterwards and get to know them.

We are talking about coming together sooner rather than later and combining for one worship right from the start instead of having two services. That will take some adjustment. We have very compatible theology, which is what gives us confidence that it will work. They are open and affirming and they have been active in Justice for Julius. We have differences in worship style. They have a band that plays praise music. We will have to make some compromises on both sides on our worship services. They are younger and edgier—they like worshiping in places that don't look like church. I like to think we are edgy too. How many congregations have members who visit prisoners on death row? They minister to post-evangelicals, people who have been hurt by the church. We have ministered to LGBT folks for ten years—many of them have been hurt by the church.

They have more people than we do. We will have to trust that if and when we merge, and that means merging congregations, merging bank accounts and merging ownership to our church building and land, they won't try to take control by out-voting us.

I hope we can trust that God is bringing us together to do a new thing and to do more ministry in our community. It's not up to Mary and me. You have to trust that this is what God is calling us to do.

Conclusion

Fred Craddock has a beautiful sermon on today's Scripture. He says that we're still a week away from Christmas, but it's Christmas already because of Joseph. God chose the right guy to be Jesus' dad. We know that when Jesus is born, the man who will teach him, raise him, listen to him, show him how to be a carpenter, take him to the synagogue, teach him the Bible, and teach him his lessons is a good man and he will do right. When you have somebody like that, it's already Christmas, and Christmas will last as long as God finds in every community one person who says, "I will do what is right."

I would add, "as long as God finds in every community one person, and one congregation, who says, "I will trust in God when it matters."

The question, of course, is whether you will be that person and whether we will be that congregation.

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