

Sermon ✝ December 18, 2022

Matthew 1:18-25

Frank H. Maxwell

Today is the 4th Sunday in Advent. For most of this season, the focus in scripture is on two main characters: John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus. And for the 12 days of the Christmas season, we focus on Mary and, of course, Jesus.

Now Joseph, who in a sense is the step-father, is always there but very much in a secondary or minor role. That is, until today. For today we consider Joseph.

Matthew's Gospel reminds us that Joseph is a righteous man—righteous to a fault. But he's mired in an unrighteous mess. He's gotten a double dose of negative news from his wife to be. First, the bad news: she's pregnant. Second, the worse news: the child's not his. What is a righteous man like Joseph supposed to do?

Oh, it all started out innocently enough. No doubt Joseph could still remember how he and his fiancée, Mary, had been betrothed. They had followed the law to the letter. There was no hint of impropriety . . . no trace of a hurried engagement.

Joseph and Mary appeared to be squeaky clean. They were right by the law. And make no mistake: the law was clear. In those days couples had to run two gauntlets before getting married. Mary and Joseph had cleared the first hurdle: public vows before witnesses. They had done their "I do's" before God and everybody. Now, Joseph knew, only the second hurdle remained. As soon as Joseph moved Mary into his house, the marriage would be consummated.

Of course, Joseph had no reason to believe that the wedding schedule should go other than according to plan.

Now his family and friends could do what families and friends do when a wedding day is imminent. You know: buy them pieces for their favorite china pattern, compare prices of toasters at Target, or maybe even chip in for a honeymoon expense fund. To all outward appearances, Joseph's prenuptial relationship was on the right track. The blood tests were done, the marriage license approved. Nothing stood in the way of his marriage to Mary.

But something went wrong for poor Joseph. Despite all his attempts to follow the law to the letter, his wedding plans had gone awry. Joseph in all his righteousness had not foreseen his fiancée's surprise pregnancy. And soon . . . she would be showing.

On the one hand, being a righteous man, he could not endure his fiancée's apparent infidelity. From Joseph's point of view, he had no choice. The law and his personal sense of honor demanded that he break off the engagement. After all, Joseph was a righteous man.

On the other hand, Joseph knew the terrible cost of publicly divorcing his wife-to-be on the charge of infidelity . . . For such an offense the law demanded blood . . . Mary's.

So what does Joseph choose? A quiet divorce. You know, a little no-fault job. Maybe go to some state like Illinois where the paperwork won't leave a paper trail. Hire some lawyer who doesn't ask too many questions.

No doubt Joseph feels that's the only way open to him. As a righteous man, he can do nothing less than break it off with Mary.

Yet as a man who once loved and maybe still loves Mary, he must do so discreetly to preserve her life. But, even the most righteous man must eventually tire.

When all hell seems to be breaking loose, even the most upright person must at some point lay down to rest. What else could Joseph do?

Even the most righteous person in the world must at some point let down his guard in the hope of a decent night's rest. But sleep on such a night doesn't always come easy. And it may not have been easy for Joseph.

Have you ever had such a night? Tossing and turning over a decision you've made about some unseemly matter? It may just be whether you calculated your taxes correctly. Or perhaps you lay awake wondering whether you've disciplined your child enough or too much. Or maybe you regret a word you said in what seemed at the time righteous anger.

So eventually the doubting and wondering must have gotten Joseph to the point where all he could do was let down his guard just enough . . . to sleep. Sometimes the only opportunity God has to speak to the righteous is when they do finally let down their guard.

It seems the righteous often have trouble hearing God, being so sure they know what God demands already.

So it is in Joseph's sleep where God's voice finally gets through. Only in his dreams could Joseph listen to such odd words of a divine visitor—*an angel of the Lord*.

So righteous Joseph, righteous tired Joseph is finally exhausted enough to listen to God. In that deathlike state called sleep, Joseph can do no more righteous things, but can finally hear the word of the Lord.

And the angel lays it on ol' Joseph. "*Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So don't be afraid to marry Mary. Don't be afraid, Joseph!*"

There's the rub! Joseph was observing the law, alright. But Joseph was following the law out of fear. Fear of what other people would think. Fear of what might happen. Fear that a scandal could never be used of God for anything good. But that's precisely where Joseph was mistaken—and now he knew it.

Why in Joseph's own family tree there had been character after character who got caught in scandal, yet beyond that scandal God still worked the good.

There was Joseph's namesake, who said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt: "*You meant it for evil, but God for good!*"

Then there were those checkered people from his own bloodline: Rahab, the prostitute; Ruth, that "brazen" Moabite; and King David himself, a royal scoundrel if there ever was one.

By now Joseph could not deny it. God had been saving—*around and in spite of* scandal all along. Now it was time for Joseph to put his righteousness to work in God's merciful salvation plan. Joseph, in the dreaminess of sleep, listens long enough to get the picture.

God in God's wisdom will save humanity through this scandalous child. And Joseph's righteousness cannot and should not stand in the way of God's mercy.

So Joseph weds Mary. Jesus, who will be as his son, will also stand in the line of David. Joseph is finally obedient—not to the letter of the Torah law, but to the most bedrock law of all, the law of divine mercy.

It is no wonder, then, that we usually see pictures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in stained glass! You know, those stained-glass portraits of the holy family's nativity.

Some people will tell you that stained-glass pictures are reserved for the perfection of saints—that the light coming through gives definition to their saintly halos. Don't you believe them!

Stained-glass pictures are not beautiful because they are perfect, but because the glass is broken into shards and painstakingly reassembled.

It is a powerful metaphor for all life. It is in our own brokenness that we come to this place that we might know peace and restoration.

Just like Mary and Joseph, we are pieces of broken glass graciously joined together . . . for the glory of God.