

Choosing Love: Joseph's Story

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11 December 2022

Matthew 1:18–25 offers a different version of the Christmas story than we're used to. These verses from the first chapter of Matthew stand in contrast with the story of Jesus' birth in Luke, which is the one we're all familiar with. We'll have to wait for Christmas Eve to hear that one.

In Matthew we have none of the elements we all know from church services and Christmas pageants and nativity scenes and Christmas carols: There's the journey to Bethlehem, the fact that there's no room at the inn, the stable with its quiet, watchful animals, the manger filled with hay, angels, shepherds. Chapter 2 of Matthew does chronicle the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem, but the rest of those familiar elements are missing from his account. Here we have none of the drama of the weary young couple's trip on the donkey or the night of the birth itself.

In Luke the story of Jesus's birth is told through Mary's experience—from the time the angel Gabriel tells her she'll conceive by the Holy Spirit to her song of praise to the moment she swaddles her baby boy and lays him in the manger. Luke focuses on what God is doing through Mary. But Matthew tells us about Joseph.

Joseph—remember that guy? What comes to mind when you hear Joseph's name in the Christmas story? He's the one who's always standing at Mary's side in those nativity scenes, perhaps looking slightly bewildered. We don't know much about him, other than the fact that he was a carpenter and, Matthew tells us, a righteous man. He doesn't speak in the entire Bible, not even in this passage, so we're left to speculate about how he's feeling and what he's thinking about all this.

It's probably safe to say that it must have been a bitter blow to Joseph when Mary turned up pregnant. He must have felt betrayed. He must have known people would talk about it.

In those days, an engagement was more binding than what we call an "engagement" today. When a couple was engaged in Mary and Joseph's time and place, the groom assumed legal rights over the woman, and the arrangement could be broken only by a legal divorce.

According to Jewish law, which is spelled out in chapter 22 of the book of Deuteronomy, a pregnant Mary should be punished for adultery. In fact, women in her situation were to be dragged to the city gates and stoned to death. And we're told Joseph is a righteous man, which suggests he's been a good, law-abiding Jewish man who follows the rules.

The rules say Mary should be punished, but even before the angel comes to him, Joseph has planned to dismiss her quietly, thus *choosing* to protect her reputation and her life. Even though he thinks she has hurt him, he plans to show her mercy. Instead of doing what's expected and what is "right" according to his heritage and his community, he is going to dismiss her without a fuss.

He's got a plan. He knows what he's going to do. It's a sad ending to their engagement, but at least he is choosing to be compassionate and Mary doesn't have to die. But then he has a dream, and an angel of the Lord tells him not to hesitate to make Mary his wife. The angel explains that Mary's baby is from the Holy Spirit and that Joseph is to name him Jesus.

Joseph has to choose again—he has to choose whether to pay attention to the dream and obey God. I imagine he might have been tempted to say, "I'm disappointed, but I've done enough for Mary already. She's on her own now, and besides, I don't want to take responsibility for a kid who's not mine."

But he chooses to obey. He chooses to show his love for God by sticking with Mary. He risks being disobedient in the eyes of the world—becoming an outcast to family and community—and risks looking like a fool for the sake of being obedient to God's call. After all, some people might think Joseph is the baby's father, but others will undoubtedly suspect that another man is the father. In the patriarchal culture Mary and Joseph live in, the birth of the firstborn son is crucial to the family line and to the transfer of property. Yet Joseph is ready to give up the right to be the genetic father of his own firstborn son. He doesn't even get to choose a name for this child; he's told what to call him.

In the face of all that, Joseph simply stays with Mary and takes responsibility for naming and helping to raise this little boy.

You may have watched this week's short video from the Bible Project. Cindy has been putting links to their Advent videos in the weekly newsletter, and if you haven't seen them, I urge you to do so; each one is only about five minutes long.

The Bible Project video about love points out that Jesus' followers learned about love by looking to his teachings and how he was living his life. At one point he was asked which was the most important command in the Jewish scriptures. He answered by quoting from Deuteronomy, where it says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." But then he added, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That sounds like two things—loving God and loving your neighbor—but the question was Which is the most important?

The Bible Project writers say that asking that question misses the point. Jesus is saying that we show our love of God *through* our love for other people. Love of God and love for other people

are two sides of the same coin. Jesus takes it a step further and says we are to love people we don't like, people who have hurt us, even our enemies. So clearly he isn't talking about romantic love, or the kind of love we feel for our families, or the way we might love certain types of music, or, dare I say, Christmas cookies.

The love Jesus is talking about is a choice. It's not an emotion, which after all is changeable, and it's not about affection or even fondness for somebody. Rather it's something we decide. We show love through how we choose to treat others, how we act toward them.

For years I struggled with the meaning of the command to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." *Gee*, I thought, *I hope I can do better than that. What if I don't love myself very much?* But when I read the book *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis with the Centre Street book group last year, I was glad to finally find someone who made sense of that command for me. The kind of love Jesus talks about isn't based on whether you like someone or think they're a good person, Lewis says. We may never like some people, especially those who have hurt us or those we think behave despicably. But we are still called to at least wish the best for them—just as we wish the best for ourselves. We can choose to give up any revenge fantasies we might have and hope that no harm comes to them. We can give them the benefit of the doubt.

Joseph chooses to show great love and compassion toward Mary even though people might be talking about him and think he's not only disobedient under the law but a fool. And when God speaks to him through an angel in a dream, he believes God. He doesn't argue about it or question God or refuse to do what God tells him. Instead he lays aside his expectations, his pride, and his ego, and goes ahead with the marriage and making a family with Mary. He chooses love. And he lets his actions speak for themselves.

The Rev. John Buchanan calls Joseph "the first practitioner of the new morality of Jesus Christ, in which love is central, and kindness and compassion and forgiveness challenge and change conventions and custom and religious rules and laws." Buchanan and some other commentators even wonder if Joseph was a role model for Jesus when it came to choosing loving action over obeying the law. For example, Jesus broke the law by healing people on the Sabbath and refusing to condemn a woman for adultery even though the law said she should be stoned to death.

Friends, Joseph is not just a bit player in this Christmas story. Matthew wants to tell us something here. We are invited to be like Joseph: to be channels of God's love through our actions, by practicing extravagant generosity, compassion, mercy, and assuming responsibility and just quietly doing what needs to be done. That may mean taking care of elderly parents, preparing meals for your family day in and day out, practicing what has been called "the grace of daily obligations."

I hope this scripture passage will help us all see Joseph as more than that guy standing off to the side in the story of Jesus' birth. We have opportunities every day to be like him and choose love. Thanks be to God.