

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Title: The Joseph Dilemma

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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It is amazing that when Joseph woke up from his dream that he did what the Angel commanded him and took Mary as his wife. Why is this amazing? According to John Ortberg it is because Vs.19 says Joseph was a righteous man. Which means his identity was wrapped up in his obedience to the law of Moses. Joseph did not eat unclean food, he didn't mix with the wrong kind of people. He didn't keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra bucks.

Speaking of carpentry I shared with the folks at the Pancake breakfast that back in Galilee during the 2nd century the Christian apologist Justin Martyr said during his life time it was still common to see farmers using plows made by Jesus of Nazareth which would have been over 100 years after the Lord had died!

Joseph was the kind of person people wanted to be like: just as a businessman in our days aspires to be a CEO, or an Athlete wants to be an All star...an Israelite wanted to be righteous because then you were respected and admired, like Joseph.

But he's a righteous man with a problem. The girl he promised to marry is going to have a baby & whoever the father is—it's not Joseph.

Nazareth is a small town and as a general rule word gets around in a small town. So we have a righteous man with a pregnant fiancée in a small village where everyone knows everyone else's business. Kind of like Celebration, I'm amazed when I meet people for the first time they can tell me where I live!

Because you and I live on this side of Christmas we usually rush to the end of the story where everything turns out o.k.

But there's some very powerful elements imbued within the Christmas events besides how Jesus got here. God is beginning to redefine what it means to be righteous.

No doubt Joseph agonized over Mary's pregnancy. Put yourself in Joseph's shoes, your entire identity revolves around your commitment to the Law of Moses ...and the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 22 addresses Mary's present situation: If a woman pledged to be married is unfaithful, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of the town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous; you must purge the evil from among you.

Incidentally there is an interesting passage in Numbers 5 that lays out another option if a husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful and she denies it. He is to take her to a priest who will give her a drink called the water of bitterness. If she has defiled herself her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away and she will become accursed among her people.

Sound like ancient superstition? I was watching the discovery channel and a man in India suspected his wife of being unfaithful so the test was to take a white hot iron pulled right out of the fire and have her touch her tongue three times on it. If her tongue was burned—she was guilty and was going to be immediately stoned. Surprisingly she passed the test!

The Law of Moses was clear and Joseph's brothers in the righteous fraternity would have told him this sin must be publicly exposed and punished...

Sinners need to be excluded, standards must be maintained; righteousness always separates itself from sin and sinners. A righteous man would not hesitate. Yet Joseph wouldn't go public

Unfortunately, the tendency of some church folks is to operate in a graceless manner, according to the Letter of the law instead of following the Spirit of the law. Whenever a sinner is found out they respond with alienation instead of restoration....after all there is a Bible verse that says "expose the deeds of darkness!" or 1 Cor 5:11

Then there is the Spirit of the law; like when a Christian woman finds out her husband has had an affair, but instead of rushing to divorce because the Bible says its o.k. Yet she will look at the bigger picture and consider how this decision would affect the children, consider her part in the negative communication patterns of their marriage, extend a second chance for her husband to grow spiritually from his fall. Deny her rights in favor of extending forgiveness. Just like Ephesians 4:32 states Forgiving one another just as God has in Christ forgiven you.

Imagine the agonizing Joseph must have endured. Joseph knew Mary was pregnant before the Angel came along to speak to him.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes: your teenage fiancée tells you she's pregnant and the story line is: An angel came to me and said you are going to have a miracle baby that will be the savior of the world. Teenage girls are known to bring a little drama to the household. & think of the stories we told as teenagers to get out of trouble. This was probably an arranged marriage. Joseph most likely did not know her very well. Are you trying to make a fool out of me—

an Angel, virgin birth, savior of the world's sins. He decided to divorce her quietly.

Why did the Lord make Joseph wait till after he had to struggle and get his heart broken? Why couldn't an Angel come to him before hand and explain everything and remove the anxiety?

This is the Joseph dilemma...as John Ortberg points out—anxiety removal is not God's #1 goal for our spiritual lives. It wasn't for Joseph and it isn't for you and me. God seems to have a ministry of disequilibrium, where He upsets our world to get our attention and redirect us to His way of thinking. God is allowing turmoil in Joseph's life so he'll come to a new era of growth & spiritual understanding...grace trumps rules/forgiveness instead of judgment

Maybe your life has some confusing elements in it, where you are uncertain about what is going on and why God is allowing it. This could be a God moment when the Lord is moving within you.

Last week I had a close friend whose sister died. He told me I won't be able to handle this. I responded, instead of slipping into a drunken stupor to numb your pain, rise up and take on her legacy of goodness and be a pillar of strength for everyone else in your family

The question is: will you recognize God is on the move and trust Him to do something in your life—even though you don't yet know the outcome? If you are a Christian you should expect some spiritual challenges and assignments. At the first Christmas the fate of the world rested upon the responses of two rural teenagers.

I think it is noteworthy Joseph was the kind of man who prioritized compassion over his rights for justice with his dilemma.

Joseph had to sacrifice his entire reputation by following the angel's directive, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." His days as a righteous man would be over. I'm sure that Joseph had doubts circulating in his head about the whole thing...second guessing his dream. But there was no way the people in town were going to believe an angel came to this obscure village to announce the conception of a child within the virgin teenager. He would never be invited into his friend's homes, or given their business or admired as a righteous person again—if he committed himself to this baby...he would do as at enormous sacrifice. Which again is the same challenge and dilemma we face.

Joseph obeyed the Lord and took Mary as his wife and named the child forever tying his destiny to the lives of these two stained reputations. Joseph risked everything on what God was doing.

Mark 6 says that Jesus had four brothers James, Joseph, Judas and Simeon. He had two sisters named Brittany and Heather. Each of Jesus' brothers was named after the Israelite patriarchs because Jesus was fulfilling the promises made to them by God.

We see the price Joseph paid in Mark 6:3 when the people say about Jesus, Isn't this the son of Mary? It might be that Joseph is dead, but even if that was the case, a child was always identified by his father's name. To refer to a man as the son of the mother was a harsh expression, like a modern day insult we use. Mark 6 reflects that decades later Joseph's reputation still had not recovered from his marriage.

Philip Yancey points out a male head of household would have sufficed for the Roman Census. Did Joseph drag his pregnant wife along to Bethlehem in order to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village?

Since that time millions of people have sacrificed for the sake of the child called Jesus. Many have given up status, possessions, convenience, even their lives—just like Joseph.

Maybe God decided that Jesus, who would be called a friend of sinners, should be raised in a family that knew firsthand what it feels like to be regarded in the spiritually second class category.

Maybe part of why Jesus had a heart for unrespectable people is that He was raised by a father who sacrificed his respectability for his son.

Maybe Jesus had compassion on women who were walking scandals because He knew what it meant to His mom that his father stuck by her when she was single and pregnant while all the righteous folks said take a hike.

When Jesus was teaching in the sermon on the Mt and said Unless your righteousness passes that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven...I wonder if the Lord thought I've seen the better kind of righteousness firsthand through my father Joseph...Grace instead of judgment.

When Joseph made the decision to wed Mary he thought it was the end of being known as a righteous man. He did not know that the child he would adopt would bring a new kind of righteousness defined by compassion.

Friends the Christmas message is that Jesus came into our world to extend us grace & forgive us our sins. May we follow in Joseph's spiritual footsteps & follow God's call to love one another.