

## MATTHEW 1:18-25 AND ISAIAH 7:10-17

DECEMBER 21, 2019

### “DON’T BE THAT GUY”

A few years ago, a company that sold camping gear and outdoor apparel had an advertising campaign in which a hapless businessman, dressed in suit and penny loafers made a run at enjoying a day in the great outdoors. It wasn’t a pretty sight watching him slide down a muddy hillside, tiptoe perilously across a rock-strewn stream, or shelter himself from a rain shower with his briefcase. The motto of the company – if you want to enjoy the outdoors, *don’t be that guy!*

It was a message about being prepared for what you’re doing - it appealed to the ideal of a well thought-out life. If we live prepared the ad suggests, we’ll not only enjoy what we do in life – the unexpected won’t bother us. I had a professor in Seminary who tried to prepare we future pastors by saying parish life is not simply filled with interruptions, parish life IS the interruptions. I tried to ignore that piece of advice for years – but he was largely right.

There are two men featured in our lessons today – a king and a carpenter. Both encounter unplanned events of no small magnitude. In the first, the prophet Isaiah is sent to Ahaz, King of Judah, because Ahaz’s people and his capital city Jerusalem were in peril. Two nations to the north – Judah’s estranged cousin Israel, also known as Ephraim, and the Assyrians had formed an alliance and wanted Jerusalem for themselves. Isaiah asked the king to ask God for wisdom – in our lesson referred to as “a sign”, but the king refused.

Isaiah 7:12 implies he didn’t want to bother the Lord with something he could handle himself. “*I won’t put the Lord to the test*” is what he said. An exasperated, Isaiah says “*ok, have it your way – figure this one out for yourself.*” God will work it out His way eventually. God’s way will be Immanuel – a Hebrew term meaning “*God with us.*” When paired and contrasted with Matthew’s introduction of Joseph, the story of Ahaz conveys a pretty clear message – “*don’t be that guy.*” Ahaz exemplifies one way of living – by our own inclinations.

But Joseph epitomizes another – a dramatic dissimilarity to Ahaz. The issue common to both men is common to all of us – how do we assess and decide on situations not of our own making, much less of our liking. To whom do we turn when life, which is not simply occasioned by bouts of the unexpected – but can be described as those pleasant intervals between the un-expected, lived to the best of our ability? Joseph’s decision making offers us the following:

First know what God’s word says. Joseph was engaged – whereby he pledged himself and his faithfulness to a woman, a formal process which included most everything about marriage but a shared home. Pregnancy out of “wedlock” was a serious civil and cultic offense.

In Deuteronomy 22:24 an engaged or betrothed woman is called “a wife.” This same passage says that if such a “wife” is found with child not of her betrothed husband, she and the man who impregnated her could be stoned to death. Joseph knew the law, which gave

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him a remedy for his situation. But Joseph's thought process extended beyond the formal engagement process, as Matthew tells us, and shows us something else.

Determine what the word of God intends. We tend to think of law as settling disputes fairly. I remember the motto emblazoned on the side of police cars in my hometown of St. Paul – it was “to protect and to serve.” That is what the law of Israel, of God, was intended to do. Stoning someone for unfaithfulness might have protected the community from rampant immorality and family chaos, but it didn't always serve the neighbor. Joseph sought for Mary “a softer landing” for her pregnancy. A “quiet” divorce would allow Mary and whoever the father of her child was to do the right thing – marry. Joseph would be heartbroken, but no one would be dead. That perhaps more than my first observation is why Matthew says Joseph was a “righteous man.”

Wait upon the Lord. Joseph took some time – how much we don't know. Matthew tells us Joseph ‘had in mind’ to divorce Mary, and that “*while he considered this an angel appeared to him.*” God's word is truth, and our highest authority for matters of faith and life – but Joseph's story reveals to us another dimension to faith – listening to and for the leading of God. By that I don't mean “*see if God has a new thing in mind*” which is usually shorthand for “*maybe God will come around to my way of thinking.*” God will not contradict his written word – but God in Christ will give us grace to find in his word that which seeks our welfare - the word of grace that both protects and serves. Joseph heard that word – a word of grace that not infrequently starts out “do not be afraid.”

Ahaz would not trouble God – Joseph was untroubled by God telling him to do something courageous but also supremely compassionate. In your life – “*be that guy.*” By taking Mary for his wife and not exposing her to public shame, Joseph absorbed that shame. No one was going to buy that “conceived by the Holy Spirit” story even in the ancient world. For whatever remained of Joseph's life – the child was his. He had to content himself with the knowledge that the child he raised would someday raise him. That's not a bad consolation prize by the way.

Joseph by faith accepted shame that was not his. He did it believing “that son of his” would do the same for him. Mary's Jesus, Paul says in II Corinthians 5:21, “*became sin who knew no sin*” – and “despising the shame” accepted on the cross a punishment we deserved.

You see, God will work it out his way eventually – yes indeed. AMEN