
CHRISTMAS EVE MESSAGE
MATTHEW 1:18-25
DECEMBER 24, 2019
“A JOSEPH PROJECT”

(Read Genesis 50:19-21 & Read Luke 2:1-4)

Roughly 1,800 years before a man from Nazareth in Galilee named Joseph listened to God and spared a young girl’s life – two lives actually, another man named Joseph spared the lives of 11 men who decades earlier tried to take his. The Joseph we recognize tonight is the husband of Mary, and we’ll get to his story in a minute. But I want to refresh our memories about the other Joseph because he matters and names matter in the Bible. It’s no coincidence that God would choose as the man who would set legal conventions aside to show mercy - a Joseph.

The very first Joseph of the Bible – his story is told over 13 chapters of the book of Genesis, was the 11th of 12 sons of Jacob – who was also known as Israel. Joseph’s father loved him, a bit too much it seems, and his brother’s resentment of that fact led them to feign his death to their dad and sell him to slave traders – he eventually landed in Egypt. But like his namesake in our story from Matthew, the original Joseph was a good man – a righteous young man, and he managed to rise to power in Egypt, eventually becoming second in command in that nation. A severe drought forced his no-account brothers to come to Egypt to buy food, which led to an emotional reunion with his old father, and after he died a reckoning with his brothers.

Joseph through his position in the government was the law of the land – and it wouldn’t have been hard for him to settle accounts with his brothers. But he chose another way – grace. He took a transgression suffered and gave it to God, telling them “*you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...the saving of many lives.*” The law arbitrates disputes – deciding for or against someone - punishing a wrongdoer. Grace seeks the welfare particularly of a wrongdoer.

Our Joseph – Mary’s Joseph – God’s servant Joseph, had the law on his side, yet even without an angel’s visitation was leaning in the direction of grace. Our story from Matthew tells us of his plan to “quietly divorce” Mary when news of her child reached his ears or as is probably the case was there for all the world to see. But if Christmas is about anything it’s about men and women seeing another way to treat each other – the way God has chosen to treat us.

Matthew later tells us in his Christmas story how distinguished Wise Men joined Luke’s shabby shepherds in Bethlehem because of a hunch they had that God was doing something to elevate the human race and make us what we were created to be – loving people who deserved each other instead of people who too often despise each other. The Josephs of the Bible show us that such hunches or hopes are not in vain. A 12th century bishop named Bernard of Clairvaux said that had Mary not believed God, she would not have conceived and bore the Son of God.

We tend to think all Joseph had to do was marry a woman he'd planned to marry anyway. What's so hard about that? Divorcing her was kinder than having her face the prospect of being stoned for adultery, that's true. Marrying her meant taking her "shame" – responsibility for it in fact. Joseph was a righteous man – he did the right things. Then he was asked to do a godly thing.

Of all the astonishing things about the Christmas story, the faith of Mary and Joseph is most incredible. Let's face it, if it's God we're talking about a virgin birth is no big deal. The other night I was watching a version of Dicken's "*A Christmas Carol*" in which a quite giddy Ebenezer Scrooge woke up on Christmas morning and marveled at all the work the three Spirits of Christmas had done on him. "*They did it all in one night – well of course, they're spirits!*"

God choosing to inhabit a woman's womb and become a helpless child shows power through vulnerability and humility – not brute strength. The God of the Old Testament shook mountains, split seas, and appeared in burning bushes. The incarnation is shall we say, out of character. Christianity teaches that God inhabited the frame of a human baby. Compared to that, no miracle of any magnitude we might ascribe to God matters much – if one can believe God lay in a manger, water into wine or walking on water is a mere trifling. One might even dare believe that one can be forgiven their sins by a God who was called a couple of sinners, momma and papa.

Unlike the Joseph of Genesis, the Joseph of Matthew doesn't speak grace – he shows it. But that doesn't mean he didn't have a lot to think about. He could have excused himself from this party of God's he was invited to. Mary's child would have been born anyway though with a different story line - perhaps akin to the Old Testament's figure of Ruth who lost her husband to death but later married a man who wasn't afraid to take a widow for a bride – and from whose marriage eventually was born Israel's King David. God would have worked it out. God always does.

But like Genesis' Joseph, Matthew's did what he didn't have to do – and he did it to preserve life. Both Josephs deserve our admiration – would that they on this Christmas night also engender in us some imitation. The world would be a bit better if we tried. On Christmas baby news and good news of forgiveness meet - the manger and the cross are never far apart and ought both be in our nativity sets. The Christmas mystery of the incarnation is not finally a scientific question– it's a moral one. Why would the creator of the stars care enough about you and I to take our flesh, share our woes, and forgive us all our sins? Genesis' Joseph said it – Matthew's simply believed it. The answer of course is that the only thing God thinks of is our good. This is quite a story. Isn't it amazing that now it includes you? AMEN