

“Not an Ordinary Joe”

Matthew 1:18-25

Just like that, one day she told me: “I’m pregnant, Joe. I know, I know, but . . . it . . . it’s not your baby. Please Joe. Just let me explain.”

Explain? Hold my hand and spell out just how and why you’ve become pregnant by someone else? I don’t think so.

Whatever it was I wanted from her at that point, it wasn’t an explanation. An absurd line kept running through my mind like words from a B-grad movie script, “I guess this means our engagement is off.”

What was I supposed to do? Give her a hug and say, “It’s okay. We’ll work things out”? Should I call the newspaper and ask them to reprint our engagement picture inside a circle with a slash through it?

I walked out the door as she begged me to stay, and I didn’t even say good-bye. What happened next is still a blur. I recall walking away, slowly, with my head down. I saw no one and heard nothing. I must have walked for miles, trying to choke back [the] agony that came from somewhere so far down inside I’d never felt it before. Finally I started sobbing and didn’t care who saw me.

Then I was running. How far would I have to go before my lungs and legs would hurt more than the pain inside? It must have been my fault. Why would she do something like this if I hadn’t somehow made her do it? But what had I done?

It made no difference. I would punish myself for the wrong and take the blame instead of her. I could say it was all my fault. I kept running farther and farther from familiar surroundings with no thought of when I would turn back.

And then I was in a park, wandering from one bench to another, trying to find a place without people. Why did the lovers keep walking past me? What right did they have to embrace with their arms and their eyes in the presence of my pain?

Her betrayal refused to release its stranglehold on my mind. My fiancée. The girl I loved more than anyone in this world, carrying the child of another man. My feelings rampaged like a swollen stream – murky, churning, filled with debris.

What kind of a world could create a hurt this monstrous? What kind of God could allow it?

I picked up rocks and threw them hard as I could into the dense growth along the nature trail. The slashing sound of stone tearing through leaves and twigs fueled my anger. More rocks, more harm, more hurt. And then I stopped.

Each stone traveled only a few feet into the foliage before dropping with a soft thump to the ground. Futile. Whatever I did was useless. I could expend all the energy and make all the noise I wanted, but it wouldn’t change a thing.

My dilemma stood like the forest which had swallowed the stones of my rage. The trees seemed to stare back at me – fixed, unmoving, oppressive.

Explain? Right. Sure, go ahead. How could I even listen to someone who would do this to me? Why explain the obvious? What words could describe why I had been rejected and tossed on the scrap pile?

There was no explanation. No possibility outside what I felt.

Wasn't she the one I had risked to love because I knew she would never do this to me? We had promised to wait and had kept the fullness of our love from each other, . . . for this?

Explain? I wish you could, Mary. I wish to God you could [David McCasland, Pinstripe Parables. Grand Rapids: Discovery House (1995), 27-29].

Our Gospel Reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1, verses 18 through 25. Here now the Word of the Lord.

[Read Matt. 1:18-25]

David McCasland, whose modern portrait of Joseph's situation I just adapted, portrays well what might have gone through Joseph's mind in the opening act of the Gospel of Matthew. While the Bible does not tell us a lot of details about Joseph, every description of him seems to indicate someone of extraordinary character and faithfulness.

Most extraordinary, if we read closely the timeline presented here in Matthew, is that it seems that Joseph must have gotten the news about Mary's pregnancy *first* before knowing the full story. And so anything Mary might have told Joseph (and we don't know that she was able to tell him much of anything because of the rules of that culture), anything Joseph might have heard would have seemed to be a fairytale. Who could believe her story? What an excuse! And what would she say? *Well, Joseph, I'm pregnant but I have always remained faithful to you. Yeah, right?!*

And so we could understand if Joseph had the feelings I acted out earlier. We have to remember that when we read about these people in Scripture that they are not just characters wearing bathrobes in a Christmas pageant. These were real people with real feelings. All of them were going about their business, in the case of Mary & Joseph – looking forward to their wedding date - until God changed the circumstances, and their lives would never be the same. And only *Mary* would be burdened with more radical change in life than Jesus' adopted father.

But with all of this, it is interesting to note that Joseph is mentioned only in three of the Gospels, and with that, he is mentioned only during the episodes of Jesus' birth and childhood. After that, he seems to just drop out of the story.

So the Christian tradition has followed suit and generally ignored the step-father of our Lord. Our Christmas carols might be a good example of this. Think of your favorite Christmas hymns. How often do we sing about Joseph? We sing of "virgin, mother and child," "angels from the realms of glory," "shepherds in the fields abiding," and a "little town of Bethlehem," "we Three Kings of Orient" and even the "bells on Christmas day," but Joseph is rarely mentioned in our songs of Christmas!

Leslie Flynn suggests that it might be Joseph's silence in Scripture that contributes to his downgrading: Not a single word he utters is recorded in the gospel story. And he disappears quickly after the first few scenes.

So the paucity of information we have on Joseph in the Bible made many scholars speculate that Joseph was probably much older than Mary at the time of their marriage and that he must have died sometime shortly after Jesus turned twelve and had his boyhood disappearing act when they visited Jerusalem. You remember that scene? Mary and Joseph are on their way out of Jerusalem and look in the back seat of the station wagon to find it empty. And so they turn it all around and search up and down Jerusalem until, of all places, they find Jesus in the Temple playing Bible Trivia with the Scribes and Rabbis. And he has the smart aleck reply to their questions of concern: “Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s House.” Real funny, Jesus! The nerve!

Well, guess what? That’s the last we hear of Joseph. Maybe he came unglued from this episode. Maybe he was no longer of literary use to the Gospel writers, because Matthew himself notes in this latter story that Jesus was at least theologically aware of the origin of his paternity. Or, maybe Joseph did die. Guess we may never know in this life.

But what is important, I think, as we enter the Advent season, a time when we long for Jesus’ return just as the Ancient Israelites longed for a Messiah’s first visit before the first century A.D., as we enter this season, I think it important to reflect on what we *do* know about Joseph. And maybe we need to spend a little time in his shoes in order to understand more fully his circumstance. Mary we will talk about next week. Today, though, I want to ask, what was it like to be Joseph?

Return to the scene again with me where Mary drops the bombshell: she’s pregnant. What would that have been like? Well, first I think it important to mention a small difference between Ancient Jewish customs on marriage and ours. In our day, the breaking of engagements is sometimes done flippantly. There is the story of a young man who ordered an engagement ring from the jeweler and asked the jeweler to engrave the names, “To Joanne Love John.” The jeweler suggested in a fatherly manner, “Take my advice and have it engraved simply, “Love John.”

But betrothal in Joseph’s day was as binding as marriage is in our day – maybe more so since our conception of marriage seems to be weakening daily. You can see the spirit of this older, more binding tradition even in the text when Joseph is referred to as Mary’s husband in verse 19, even before they have exchanged vows. So infidelity during engagement was looked down upon severely.

Finally when Mary could no longer hide the news, for it may have become increasingly more difficult to hide, she breaks the surprise to Joseph. And like so many other writers of Scripture, Matthew leaves the emotions of the person between the lines. Certainly Joseph must have been confused, jolted, sickened, stunned, and bewildered. But listen to Matthew; he simply states matter-of-factly Joseph’s response, “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

Is this what you would do? What range of feelings he must have had, but “because he was a righteous man. . . .” What does that mean exactly? It does not necessarily mean that he was gracious – but that he was “just.” He would have been completely in his rights to have made the whole thing public, perhaps even to have Mary punished in some form publicly. She at least would have received scorn in her culture’s eyes. But “because he was a righteous man,” Joseph did not do this.

Stanley Porter notes several theories as to why Joseph sought to divorce Mary secretly when he learned of her pregnancy. The first is that Joseph suspected that Mary had been sexually unfaithful and possibly was preserving his own reputation – “because he was a righteous man.” And if that were the case, we certainly could not blame him. He would be doing an acceptable thing in accordance with Jewish laws and customs.

The second theory is that he was “he was completely bewildered at this development because of her supposed virginity; he had a legal, if not moral, obligation to divorce a woman who was to bear the child of another man, though he desired to preserve *her* reputation. He was not only just then, he was also compassionate towards her. And this is the tradition taken by most Protestants in interpretation.

Interestingly, one other theory that has come up every now and then was that Joseph actually understood the conception of virgin conception and he felt inadequate to be involved with such a marvelous act or to expose Mary to possible ridicule.

While I am fond of the second of the three traditions, I have to admit than any one of these is possible because any one of these could fit into the custom and interpretation the passage.

Yet, regardless, we do have to see from what we have already seen in the story what a noble and righteous man Joseph was. Leslie Flynn argues, and I think rightly, with all of this, that if God had scrutinized the character of Mary, choosing a pleasing maternal parent, God certainly would examine the qualifications of the paternal parent, even if that parent was only a foster-father. Since the father did rule the roost in the Jewish home life, God certainly would have selected a “holy” leader not just in genealogy from the line of David but also someone to properly guide and protect God’s chosen family. And had the father of Jesus behaved any differently, the story of Jesus’ birth could have been quite different.

Of course, we do know the rest of the story. Joseph, our text says, “had in mind to divorce her quietly.” We don’t know of course how many days and nights Joseph tossed and turned about this difficult decision, the ambivalence he felt of exposing her, divorcing her publicly and other options.

But the Gospel of Matthew records that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to “not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

And through this dream Joseph finds divine direction and at least some relief. But what is most telling is Joseph's obedience . . . for Joseph was "a righteous man."

Again, the text states matter-of-factly,

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph did exactly what God had commanded. He did above and beyond his public duty, the duty of the laws of the land, the duty of his Jewish religion. He exceeded all that and obeyed God's particular and personal commands – knowing that in doing so, his life would never be the same, that he was giving up so much.

And for this reason, the quiet father of Jesus is honored in Scripture. Flynn writes that Joseph "is the silent servant who *acts* rather than *speaks*." And so we know that Joseph was no ordinary Joe.

The great irony of all of this is that, theologically, we too have all been adopted by a righteous Father, one even more righteous than Joseph. And God chose to have his own Son cared for and nurtured by parents who were ordinary in so many ways, yet extraordinary in their faithfulness to God.

Isaiah, who foretold of the coming Immanuel, also wrote: "The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever."

May we be thankful not only for Mary's righteousness, but also for Joseph's, and especially for a God who makes the ordinary extraordinary through his Son.

Amen.

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