

Matthew 1:18-25
Advent 4 – Year A
December 22, 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Joseph never says a word in any of the four gospels. In some ways, it's as if he only makes a cameo appearance. We are given little information into who he was other than the important fact he was a direct descendent of King David thus paving the way for God to remain faithful in upholding God's promise with Israel that a descendent of David would reside forever on the throne. Of course, that new king would be the son Joseph was soon to find out Mary was pregnant with. Yet, outside of this, we really don't know much about him leading up to this world changing event that took place that first Christmas.

We can imagine he had visions of the perfect marriage with Mary, was already dreaming of the day they would move in together, or of the life they would lead and the children she would bear. Perhaps, he was looking into carrying on the family carpentry business and building a house and a family. Yet, those plans were interrupted by the news Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant, which surely created a very unexpected twist in their future together. Think of the stress, consternation, anxiety this must have brought on; let alone, the difficult decision to be made for Joseph – stay in this relationship or dismiss Mary.

In order to fully understand the depth of what Joseph must have experienced we first need to understand some of the background details regarding engagement and marriage in Joseph's day. Today, an engagement can be called off by either one of the individuals in the relationship. The relationship is not yet binding. However, in Joseph's context he would have already been legally bound to Mary. Marriage was a two-step process with the betrothal (ie., engagement) occurring first and the actual wedding feast coming several months later at which time the couple would move in together. It wasn't simply a matter of Joseph backing out of his engagement to Mary upon hearing this news. It was much more complex and if word had gotten out the child wasn't Joseph's the consequences for Mary could ultimately have led to her being sentenced to death.

Further, the first-born son was of utmost importance in continuing the family lineage and upon hearing Mary was pregnant with a child that was not Joseph's, created yet another wrinkle in the sticky situation he found himself in. So, Joseph being an upright and faithful man decides to dismiss Mary quietly, to protect her, and to also remove himself from a situation that on first impression seems less than ideal for himself.

Before Joseph can move forward God comes to him in a dream telling him not to be afraid, to take Mary as his wife, that the child Mary is carrying is a boy to be named Jesus, that Mary's conception was from the Holy Spirit, and that this child will save the world from their sins.

Whew! Now if all that news doesn't completely throw ones plans into a whirlwind then I don't know what will. Yet we shouldn't be all that surprised because if we look back over the lives of some of the biblical characters we see how God comes into situations that are less than ideal, to people who are less than perfect, and that even in the midst of the brokenness of humanity God continues to reveal God self and to create anew. Through turmoil, trouble, challenges, and events that appear to upset the apple cart the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit are able to transform unexpected situations, apparent misfortunes, setbacks, and distractions into things that ultimately work for the good of God.

When God came to Joseph and called him to remain steadfast in his commitment to Mary and to make her his wife he was faced with a challenging decision. What appeared to be the righteous decision for Joseph to make according to custom and law of his day was to dismiss Mary since the child was not his. Yet, what God asked of Joseph ran contrary to that of which he expected. Joseph did indeed respond favorably to the call of God and in so doing became an example of the power of God's call to transform decisions and our lives.

God continues to call God's people yet today with the promise that God remains active in the lives of God's faithful people. Yet sometimes that promise and those calls the Spirit sends disrupt the lives we so desperately cling to control, make comfortable, and carefully craft the perfect image of in our minds.

In our prayer of the day earlier on we began by praying, “Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come.” As we approach the celebration of the birth of our Lord and await the time He will come again to take us to Himself perhaps we should ponder just what it is we ask when we call on Him to come into our midst. Make no doubt about it that it is good news God comes to us in Christ and as the text tells us - frees us from our sins. It is good news that Immanuel, God with us, is able to come into times of our deepest fears, darkest days, and most difficult decisions and continue to bring calm, peace, and strength for the day and journey ahead.

Yet like Joseph, through Christ’s coming and His call, we may be asked to make difficult decisions that, at times, run contrary to popular opinion. We may be asked to go with Jesus to places we would rather not go. People we would rather not associate with. We may be asked to part with things we don’t think we can live without. At times, we may sit silent just as the gospel writers left Joseph.

Yet, his actions spoke louder than any words they could put on paper. Joseph listened to what God was telling him. Joseph led through his deep love of God, his love of Mary, and his love for the child in her womb that wasn’t his. Ultimately, it was the words of the angel of the Lord that made all the difference, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid.” As we sit silently in these last few hours of Advent pondering may we too hear those same words “Don’t be afraid” and be filled with that same strength and courage to continue to respond to the call as God’s faithful people.