



“Celebrate Messiah: Believe Confidently”

Fourth Sunday of Advent
8:30 and 10:45 am Sunday, December 18, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19](#); [Romans 1:1-7](#);
[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Most of us, when faced with difficult decisions, just want to do what is best. We want to act faithfully, reasonably, legally, and, in the long run, do what is right. Only sometimes there is a way to act and be that is “more right” than you and I realize, given our human decision-making skills. We require God to guide us gently, but firmly, in order for us to do that which is “more right.”

The story of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, helps us understand a bit better what it means to believe with confidence that God **will** guide us to do what is right, when our first inclination is to do something else entirely.

You know, we don't hear much about Joseph in the Bible. He's relegated to the background in the few passages we have about Jesus in the womb, as a baby, or as a young boy. Oh, in our Christmas carols, cards, decorations, and art work Joseph is mentioned, but the laser-focus is typically on Jesus and his mother Mary. Joseph is pictured looking on with loving care and devotion, but usually standing back behind the infant and Mary mild. Why, with a few of the nativity decorations at my house, we occasionally have this debate in my family over which figurine is a common, ordinary shepherd, and which one is Joseph. Sometimes we can't tell the difference. He's just a bit, shall I say, nondescript.

Perhaps Joseph would have had it no other way. Perhaps Joseph came to know that Jesus' birth was not about Joseph at all, but about God's activity in our world—how God came to be with us and save us.

And it is in Matthew's gospel where you and I are given just enough description about this nondescript Joseph to learn how God continues to guide us into a “more right” way of being.

Matthew writes that Joseph is betrothed to Mary. Betrothal was more than an engagement as we have come to understand it in contemporary society. Betrothal, in that culture and time, was a social contract, a legally-binding first step toward marriage. Joseph and Mary, in this first step, did not live in the same household, but prepared for the day when they would. There would have been no marital relations

between them—only a pledge of fidelity toward one another as they awaited their eventual marriage.

Because of this formal betrothal, when Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, there could be only one reason: She had been unfaithful, and had broken the betrothal by being with another man. Although they were not yet married, this would still be seen as adultery. And in that patriarchal society, the penalty for an adulterous woman was grave. If Joseph announced publicly how he had been betrayed, the victim of Mary's infidelity, his honor would remain intact, but she would likely be stoned to death at the front door of her father's home. That penalty was in accordance with the Torah, the Jewish teachings in the first five books of the Old Testament. (You can read about those penalties in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.)

The other choice was for Joseph to divorce Mary quietly and send her away. Such a decision wouldn't provide Joseph opportunity to amass public sympathy for himself as the wronged man, but it would keep Mary alive. Of course, the reality of being an unwed mother in that society meant Mary and her child would probably live in poverty, with no means of making a living and no one to care for them. A kind-of death-in-life, I suppose.

It's interesting how both of the choices before Joseph were considered "right" or "faithful" or even "reasonable" in that day and time, and in accordance with religious teachings. But Matthew gives us precious insight into Joseph. He tells us Joseph was a righteous man (in other words, did what was right in the sight of God). Matthew says Joseph was not willing to "expose (Mary) to public disgrace..." We learn Joseph opted to be merciful. As he pondered the decision before him, Joseph chose what seemed to him at the time to be the "more right" path to take: Divorce her quietly. Spare her life. And then move on with his own.

But the Lord God had something "more right" in mind for Joseph. Something Joseph could not have figured out for himself. Ultimately, he would require God's guidance, reassurance, promise.

What I love about this passage is the sheer humanness of Joseph. Don't turn him into some perfect, saintly individual who has life all figured out and with no hesitation acts nobly without regard for self. Well, it took an angel of the Lord to push the envelope on this. It took an angel coming to Joseph in a dream to persuade him to follow God in a new way. That angel told Joseph "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife..." Joseph, by himself, would never have chosen to marry Mary. Would never have chosen to accept Jesus as his own son, put the seal of his name and lineage on Jesus, love him, protect him, raise him. The very choice Joseph would never have dreamed of on his own came to him in a dream. The choice was to sacrifice and serve—to forget about that honor and shame stuff of their society, to put aside his feelings of betrayal, to care for Mary, and to help that child grow up to BE what his name signified—"Jesus" means "God saves."

It took an angel of the Lord to get Joseph to re-think his plan going forward, and orient him toward a greater mercy, a more right and faithful action, and thus become a rather surprising instrument for God's saving grace.

And maybe that is the point of what we learn about Joseph today. That, like him, we might find ourselves some days in a quandary, in a pickle, about decisions in our life. In fact, right now, as I speak, you and I may be struggling with some kind of decision that needs to be made. We may suppose we know the best approach. Or we may have absolutely no idea what to do next, and are grateful for the distraction of busy holidays so we can avoid making any decision at all.

But Jesuit priest and professor Michael Simone studied this scripture and suggests the following as you and I face those decisions:

"We can trust God to send a messenger. These messengers need not be as dramatic as Joseph's nighttime visitor in order to speak authentically....We will know the messenger's arrival when we hear the words 'Do not be afraid.' These can be words from a friend or a stranger, a profoundly moving encounter with beauty or a subtle but deep change of heart. When we hear that message, we hear Christ inviting us to serve his mission in some new way."

(Michael Simone, "Encounters with Angels," *America*, December 2016)

Believe confidently—not only in this Advent season, but throughout the year—that God is alive and at work in our world, guiding you and me to do the "more right" thing. That God is sending us messengers in our own day to speak to us in the midst of our decision-making. God is calling us to be surprising instruments of his saving grace, so that compassion, forgiveness, and love will abound in the places where you and I go. Come, Lord Jesus, into our hearts and minds, hands and feet. **AMEN.**

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