

Matthew 1:18-25
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“A Carpenter Wrestles With Christmas”

Next to the Child lying in the manger, the most significant character in the drama that is Christmas is the Child’s mother. And next to her, the most significant character in the drama is the Child’s adoptive father. Because Joseph, Mary’s fiancé, does not speak in the drama, he has been called “the forgotten man of Christmas.” Yet he, the quiet, gentle carpenter, like many of you quiet, gentle types, speaks volumes. His actions do the speaking.

A Chinese pastor in Beijing regularly closes the worship service with the Benediction attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Go, preach Christ; if necessary, use words.” Joseph the carpenter preaches Christ without using words! And, in the process, Joseph shows us what it means to be a disciple of his adopted Son.

I think Matthew the tax-collector, who tells the part of the story where the carpenter wrestles with Christmas, holds Joseph before us as a model disciple. Luke the physician, who tells the part of the story involving the virgin Mary, holds her before us as a model disciple: “Let it be unto me according to Your word,” Mary says to the Living God upon news she would conceive the Son of God. For Matthew, it is Joseph, who initially experiences the wonder of Christmas as a horrible nightmare, who models what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

When we first meet Joseph, he is in pain – deep, emotional pain. Any of you who have been betrayed by someone you trusted know something of what he was feeling. He was engaged to Mary, a lovely young woman. Actually, he was more than engaged. He was “betrothed” to Mary. In the first century, getting married involved three stages. The first was engagement, going through a formal ceremony in which the man and woman promised themselves to one another. The second was betrothal, a legally binding stage. After the engagement promises, the man and woman lived apart from each other, as they prepared for the wedding. So legally binding is this stage that if either of them has a relationship with someone else, they are branded an “adulterer” or “adulteress.” If either died during this betrothal period, the other was then referred to as a “widow” or “widower.” The third stage is the wedding itself, when the whole village gathers to celebrate, and to bless the new couple.

During the betrothal stage, Joseph had been busy doing what every other fiancé in that century did ... preparing a new home for his bride-to-be. He was caught up in all the physical and emotional energy that goes into home-making. He was alive with expectations, fantasizing of love and happiness, counting the days until he could bring Mary home.

And then came the shocking news: Mary is pregnant. Joseph is stunned, to say the least – and deeply hurt. How could Mary do this? To herself? To him? To them? To their future? The only logical explanation is that Mary has not been faithful to her betrothal vows. She has cheated on Joseph, and slept with another man. She had committed adultery.

I want to – all too briefly! – reflect with you on Joseph’s wrestling with what was happening in Mary. I want to reflect on how he wrestles both before and after he learns the mystery. Joseph shows us what discipleship looks like both before and after he is told the mystery of Christmas; the mystery that what is happening is of the Holy Spirit.

Before he learns the mystery, Matthew tells us that Joseph is “a righteous man” (1:19). This means that Joseph is faithful to all his relationships. Righteous = in-right-relationship. Especially with the Living God, seeking to be obedient to God’s will as expressed in God’s law. Joseph is a “right-relationship” man.

Now, according to the Law, when a woman is unfaithful, she is to be taken to the court and openly exposed for breaking the legal bond. (So too if a man is unfaithful to his vow.) In the book of Numbers, chapter 5, it is stipulated that the priest is to have the woman drink the so-called “water of bitterness.” If she had not been unfaithful, she would not get sick. But if she had been unfaithful, the water would make her abdomen swell, and she would “bear the curse,” suffering great public shame.

As Joseph “the righteous” struggles in his pain, he chooses not to exercise his legal right. Why? Because although he seeks a right relationship with God’s Law, he also seeks a right relationship with Mary. He does not want to shame her. What good would that do? So he chooses to go to Mary secretly. According to the Law, he would need to bring along two witnesses, who would sign a certificate of divorce.

I am humbled by the carpenter’s actions. As he wrestles with what begins as a nightmare, Joseph is able to rise above his personal pain, and seek righteousness, right-relatedness with both the Law he loves and the lady he loves.

Before he learns the mystery, Joseph illustrates one of the tensions inherent in discipleship: truth and grace; grace and truth. Following Jesus Christ means living in the tension of truth and grace, grace and truth. On the one hand, never watering down God’s Holy Law. On the other hand, extending mercy to the Law-breaker. Not easy to do! Truth and grace; grace and truth. Most of us lean to one or other side of the tension. Faithful discipleship means learning, like Joseph, to live with both feet firmly planted on both sides of the tension.

Richard Mouw, recently retired President of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote a very helpful book entitled *Uncommon Decency*, subtitled “Christian Civility in an Uncivil World.” Dr. Mouw observes that people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions, while people who have strong convictions often lack civility. What we need, says Mouw, is “convicted civility” (12). Being passionately faithful to God’s revealed truth ... and doing so with uncommon grace. Joseph models “convicted civility” before learning the mystery of Christmas. He lives the tension of grace and truth, truth and grace, giving up on neither, embracing both simultaneously.

While wrestling with what to do, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph. I think it is the same angel (Gabriel) who appeared to Mary, announcing the mystery to her. Only this time, the angel comes in a dream. That, as you likely know, is what happened to the other Joseph in Scripture, Joseph the son of Jacob – so much so that Joseph was called “Joseph the dreamer.” God sends an angel to Joseph the carpenter in a dream to explain that what is feeling like a nightmare was not. Something wonderful has taken place in Mary’s womb: wonderful for her, for Israel, for the world ... and for Joseph.

God did not leave Joseph alone in his anguish over what to do. God came to Joseph, as He does for us. God communicated with Joseph, as He does for all who seek to be “righteous,” to be in right-relationship. As Joseph’s adopted Son would later say, “I am the light of the world; they who follow Me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

The angel tells Joseph the mystery. Mary has not been unfaithful. More is going on than Joseph could initially see. The angel says to Joseph: “that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Of the Holy Spirit. Of the Holy Spirit! That is what explains the strange thing happening to Mary and Joseph.

Reference to the Holy Spirit would take Joseph back to the opening lines of the Scriptures he loves, to Genesis 1:1. In the beginning, the Holy Spirit hovered over the void of nothingness, and out of that void brought forth this creation. Joseph is being told that something like that is happening again. The same Creator Spirit has hovered over the nothingness of Mary’s womb, and out of that nothingness is bringing forth a new creation. A new creation!

The angel brings this out in the name Joseph is to give to Mary’s child, the name “Jesus.” Y’shua. Yahweh is salvation. Yahweh saves. The new creation can only be named Jesus, for that is Who He is – God to the rescue!

This is why the angel further says, “for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (1:21). His people? Israel is His people? The child’s people? I thought Israel was God’s people, Yahweh’s people. His people? The child’s people? Yes, because the Child is Yahweh come to save His people from their sins! Literally the angel says, “for He Himself will save His people.” He Himself? No one but God can save His people. “Give Him the name Jesus, for He Himself will save His people from their sins.” For He Himself is God Himself to the rescue!

This is why Mary’s child is to also be called “Immanuel.” But of course! Immanuel: God with us. And God for us.

That is the mystery, the mystery of Christmas. Jesus Immanuel has been conceived in the womb of the virgin. Joseph, your beloved fiancée has not been unfaithful to you. God has been faithful to the great promise to save His people! And He is acting in a way no one ever dreamed He would!

And then the angel tells Joseph how he is to live out the mystery. “Take Mary as your wife ... give the child the name Jesus.” To be told to name Mary’s child is a technical way of saying “adopt him.” Joseph, you did not father this child. But you are now to take him into your heart as your own. You are to adopt him. And Joseph does.

At great risk! And that too is what Joseph teaches us about discipleship. To believe the mystery and then to live the mystery is to take a huge risk. Joseph runs the risk of public shame. What will happen when the citizens of Nazareth start adding up the dates? “Let’s see. The engagement party was on ... She gave birth on ... Hmm. Something is off here.” In fact, the four gospels record incidents where Jesus is slandered by some as an illegitimate child. “Take Mary as your wife.” To do so Joseph runs the risk of losing face socially.

So too we. The mystery of the conception and birth of Mary's Child does not fit modern and post-modern presupposition about what can or cannot happen. "You really believe that stuff?" I have had people ask me that many times. So have you. "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity." You really believe that stuff? To believe "that stuff" is to run the risk of being shamed as intellectually incompetent. And thus, to run the risk of being socially ostracized.

To embrace the mystery, Joseph also runs the risk of radical altering of his life-style. How could it be otherwise? Any time any of us bring a child into our lives, we run that risk! Any time we enter into any new relationship we run that risk! But Joseph more so. In that culture, everything rides on reputation and character. Joseph was known as an honest, upright, faithful man. "Take Mary as your wife." Now what? He has spent years building up his business. Now what? "Take Mary as your wife." And he did. He believed the mystery ... and acted on it, running the risk of major changes in his life-style.

Will we? Will we embrace the risk? When Jesus Christ enters our lives we cannot expect things to remain as they were. His mere Presence begins to change everything. He calls us into a different way of being and living; into His different way of being and living. To embrace the mystery of Christmas... and live it ... means being open to having our private universes turned upside down!

All of this raises deep anxiety, right? Joseph, Matthew's model disciple, also models this for us. Joseph embraces the anxiety that by necessity accompanies risk. Any time we risk – at whatever level – there is anxiety about how it will all work out.

Rudolf Bultmann helps me here. I do not agree with everything he wrote, but he is right about the nature of faith. Faith, he said, is "an openness to the future," not having to have the future spelled out in detail before we follow Jesus. And this openness to the future, says Bultmann, "involves a readiness for anxiety." "A readiness for anxiety that we each have to take upon ourselves with resolve." He continues, "Faith is this readiness for anxiety, because faith knows that God encounters us nowhere else than precisely where from our human point of view there is nothing" (*New Testament and Mythology*, 118). A surgeon I know, Mel Chetan, says that the great turning point in life is when we say, "I do not know how the future comes together." It is then that God can be God in our lives.

Joseph the carpenter has no idea how his future with Mary and her Child would come together. All his plans for the future are now changed. Nothing is now going to be as he had planned it. All he has to go on is a word from God: "this strange happening is the work of the Holy Spirit." And the command: "Take... and name." "Take Mary as your wife ... and name her child Jesus."

So, what do you sense God is up to in your life? Where is the Holy Spirit hovering over you? What dream is God dreaming in you?

Quiet Joseph stands before us posing the question: Will we trust Immanuel? Will we embrace the uncertainty, and step into the future behind Him? I do not know how it all comes together. You do not know how it all comes together. But He does. "Jesus commands my destiny!"

"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son. And you are to give Him the name Jesus, for He Himself will save His people from their sins. And Joseph arose from his sleep. And did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." And the world will be forever grateful.