

MESSAGE: “Whose Child Is This?”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to watch for God to do the unexpected and to respond as Joseph did, with compassion and integrity.

My message this morning is based in part on Adam Hamilton’s book, *Faithful: Christmas through the Eyes of Joseph*, the profits of which are donated to projects throughout the world which benefit refugees and orphans.

Have you ever been in a position where you acted with integrity, but, morally compelled to silence, could say nothing to defend yourself from accusations that your conduct was mean-spirited? It is frustrating, embarrassing, perhaps even damaging to your reputation in the eyes of others. In one church I served, I was compelled to place my secretary on involuntary leave while an accusation, later proven unfounded, was being investigated. I covered the secretary’s work, as well as my own, in addition to the work of the investigation as required by Conference and the local police. Several in and outside the church believed I was maneuvering to get the secretary fired which was completely untrue, but for reasons of confidentiality, I could say nothing.

As we look below the surface in the accounts leading to Jesus’ birth, we will see that Joseph was faced with a situation like this and that he acted with remarkable compassion and integrity to the risk of his own reputation. The example he set and probably renewed again and again throughout the formative years of Jesus’ life would guide the growing Messiah to an ethic that would one day save and redeem a world.

Matthew begins his gospel of ‘good news’ with a genealogy of Jesus through the line of Joseph, thus anchoring the Christmas miracle to a flesh and blood family. The list is not complete, but it conveys the belief that God is orchestrating these events in concert with biblical prophecy. It is unusual, though not unprecedented, for the patriarchal genealogy to include references to women, four to be precise: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. If women were to be mentioned, we might expect to see references to Sarah, Rachel, Leah, or other matriarchs of the line, but no, Matthew refers just to these four.

Why? I believe the answer to this question sets the tone for the entire gospel that follows, sounding a grace note that trumpets this message as ‘good news’ indeed. Each of the four was an unexpected anomaly to the genealogical record. In the orthodox opinions of some, you might even say they were ‘mistakes’ in the gene pool. Tamar was a victim of rape, Rahab, though an ally to invading Israelites, was a prostitute, Ruth was a foreigner, and Bathsheba, an adulteress with King David who arranged the murder of her husband Uriah,

so he could marry her. Not quite the genealogical line preferred by the Jewish equivalent of the DAR, Daughters of the American Revolution!

It is as if Matthew is preparing the reader for the story to follow. In the past, God has worked in surprising ways, through surprising people, in surprising circumstances. Get ready for something new, something different, something unexpected, something so outside-the-box from what is expected that it will be a game-changer. God, the cosmic God who made everything on earth and in the heavens, is about to become part of the genetic code of that creation, a baby born in Bethlehem.

We should not be too hard on the Sadducees and Pharisees who argued with the adult Jesus. They were practitioners of a religion which practiced, even demanded, separation from others. Do not marry into other religions, for you may lose identity and become idolatrous, worshipping other gods. Separate yourselves from the unclean, for God requires perfection. Do not associate with ‘sinners,’ for you must be righteous before God. Destroy the evil from your midst. You get the picture. The idea that God would enter into wounded humanity in order to save it must have struck them as a dangerous, subversive heresy.

Following his genealogical summary, Matthew relates the pre-Christmas record of the story from Joseph’s perspective. Let’s read Matthew 1:18-25 together...

We are told very little about Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Matthew tells us the most, but even that is precious little. Mark doesn’t mention him at all! By the second century, there was a growing hunger for greater knowledge of Jesus’ formative years. There are apocryphal works dating from this period and following that offer snapshots not recorded in the gospels, and it is possible, though highly unlikely, that they contain shreds of truth. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas), for example, purports to be a record of Jesus’ life from age 5 to 12. In it, we see Joseph sending Jesus to school to be educated which would have been an unusual opportunity for a carpenter’s son. Joseph attempts to discipline Jesus, (grabbing him by the ear at one point!) and tries to help him use his abilities with wisdom and discernment.

In the Infancy Gospel of James, also dated around AD 150, it is suggested that Mary was raised by priests from age 3 to 12, and that they sought a husband for her from among the older widowers from the House of David, intending that she be cared for as a father might his daughter. As the widowers gathered, each was given a rod or stick. Joseph took one and a dove sprang forth, landing upon his head (other versions claim that Joseph’s rod bloomed with flowers). The idea that Joseph was older, bolstered by the fact that he disappears from the biblical record before Jesus’ baptism, became popular with many artists who painted him in this manner. Even your crèche at home may reflect this bias.

If we rely solely upon the biblical record, we might assume that Joseph was closer to Mary's age, perhaps 16 or thereabouts. We do know that Jesus had siblings, but it is debated whether these were half-siblings from a previous marriage of Joseph's or whether they were children born to Mary and Joseph after Jesus. We also know that Jesus was referred to (Matthew 13:54-56) as the 'carpenter's son.' Most homes in Jesus' day were built with stone or brick, so carpenters working with wood were few in number. But carpenters were engaged in the work of making furniture, yokes for oxen or doors and shutters, etc. The Greek word translated as carpenter is *tekton*. Joseph was a *teuton*. There was another Greek word for master carpenters, *architecton*, but that term is not used of Joseph.

At first glance, the story of Jesus' birth appears to be a story of a child conceived out of wedlock—and, even worse, perhaps the result of an adulterous affair. We know this is not what happened, but the text makes it clear that Joseph *thought* this is what happened. Mary told him of the angel's announcement, but the part that muffled the explanation was "my betrothed is pregnant with someone else's child!" Let's face it, who among us would believe such an extraordinary disclaimer of conception?

It was likely that the marriage of Joseph and Mary had been arranged for years, perhaps by Elizabeth who did not live far from Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown. To cement the formal betrothal, the groom's father would have paid a 'bride-price,' called a *mohar* to the bride's father. It was a significant sum, perhaps even comparable to the price of a one-bedroom house. Most of the *mohar* would be set aside for the bride like a savings account to provide for her in the event of her husband's premature death. In addition, the groom would give the bride a sum of money called the *mattan*. This, too, functioned as a financial safety net in times of trouble. Think of it as the equivalent of an engagement ring which a suitor would work many days to afford.

At this stage of the engagement, a legal document, called a *ketubah*, was prepared with promises pledged by the groom in the presence of two witnesses. In some Jewish homes, the *ketubah* is framed and hung on the wall as a lasting reminder of promises made. If a husband divorced his wife and did not ensure that she was left with her *mohar* and *mattan*, a lien would be placed against his property and everything might be sold to provide for his ex-wife.

Returning to the biblical story, we see that Joseph likely became the first doubter of the virgin birth, and he learned of it from Mary herself! Many of us struggle to believe this part of the story because it is a miracle which cannot be duplicated in a lab, but the writer is concerned less with the biology of the conception than the theological truth of the Incarnation—that in Jesus, God took on flesh, entering our humanity. If Joseph had questions about this, it's ok that we do, too.

Joseph is devastated by the news. The *mohar* and *mattan* had been exchanged and the *ketubah* signed. He faced an ethical catch-22. He could do the righteous thing and call off the marriage by informing the priest of Mary's unfaithfulness. The monies would be returned to the groom's family, and Mary and perhaps her family would be publicly humiliated and shunned henceforth. But Joseph did not want this. Though heartbroken, he would not permit Mary to be treated in this way.

Instead, Matthew tells us that Joseph decided to divorce her quietly. Most likely, this meant that he would say he changed his mind about the marriage. As the pregnancy became obvious, people would assume Joseph was the father and that he opted not to wed Mary following intimate relations. In other words, Joseph's reputation would take the hit. Mary would keep her dowry and be eligible for marriage to another. This was a response of compassion, courage and integrity, taking the high road, though none but Joseph, Mary and God would know.

The story, of course, takes a different turn, for Joseph is told by an angel that Mary's words are true. With God's intervention and blessing, they marry and Joseph becomes the earthly father of Jesus: step father, godfather, foster father, adopted father—the title is up for grabs. What matters is Jesus becomes the carpenter's son, son of Joseph, son of David, Son of God.

And the chip doesn't fall very far from the old block, for Jesus, time and time again, will come to the aid of victims, sinners, foreigners and the unclean. Refusing to separate himself from those needing God's grace, he will feed, heal, teach and defend them. His compassion will take him to a cross where, taking the sin of others on himself, he will be crucified—not only for them, but also for us.

I cannot help but wonder as I wander: "Do we have the courage to follow in Joseph's and Jesus' footsteps, especially when the cost is high?"