

Joseph the Lawbreaker

Matthew 1:18-25

Have you ever thought about how many songs have been written about Joseph as compared to Mary? I'm sure you've heard the beautiful song, Ave Joseph; or the newer, Joseph Did You Know. I'm kidding, of course. There are no hymns to Joseph. Nobody calls Joseph the Father of God. Nobody prays to Joseph. And, I'm here to say that, while we Presbyterians don't pray to any saints, it is a shame that Joseph gets ignored in this Christmas story, for, he, like Mary, is a remarkable model for us of a man who takes steps of faith that most of us would never dream of making.

As many of you know, people didn't meet, fall in love, then get married back in the first century. Two fathers got together, one with a son and the other with a daughter, and decided the union of their families would be beneficial to all concerned, so they made a legally binding contract that their children would be married. This usually happened when the boy and girl were twelve or thirteen years old, which really put a crimp in dating during high school and college.

We might say these two barely teens were engaged at this point, but it's not quite like our engagement. The big difference is that the young man and woman, with emphasis on the word "young," were now legally married. She still lived with her parents and he still lived with his – actually, he and she would continue to live with his parents – and they hadn't so much as held hands, they were legally husband and wife.

So, when thirteen or fourteen year old Mary tells her young husband-to-be that, well, uh, umm, she's, uh, with child, young Joseph is in a quandary. It's not that his heart has been broken – romantic love was not really a big part of the equation back then. But now he is legally bound to do one of two things. First, he can follow the letter of the law, which can be found in Deuteronomy 22:21, and have Mary stoned to death by the other male members of the community. Or, if he is a compassionate man, he can divorce Mary without making a public spectacle of her. Those are his two choices – have her killed or divorce her. There was one thing the law did not allow Joseph to do: continue his plans to marry this young woman who has brought shame on herself, her family, and Joseph, too. Legally, Joseph *had* to end the relationship. And one thing Matthew makes clear is that Joseph was a good, law-abiding, righteous man.

That's when the angel shows up and gives Joseph a very strange message: *Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.*

Say again? An angel from God appears to Joseph in a dream and tells Joseph to break the law and take Mary as his wife? How can this be? Why would God send a message – in a dream, mind you, a really dependable way to get a message to someone because we all put a lot of stock in dreams – that Joseph is to break the very law he believed God had given in the first place?

Ah – don't interrupt the angel – he's about to explain. *"The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

Imagine being Joseph when he wakes up from this dream.

*Okay, so this explains everything. Mary is pregnant with...God's baby...and, uh, I have to name **God's** baby Jesus* (well, actually, Joseph would have heard the angel say the name "Joshua" because that's the Hebrew form. "Jesus" is what you get when you translate the name Joshua into Greek and then into English, but we'll let that go for now.)...*I have to name **God's** baby "Jesus" because "Jesus" means "God saves" and this baby Mary is carrying is going to save God's people from their sins.*

I picture Joseph sitting on the edge of his bed, his head in his hands, trying to decide what to do with this dream, and the fact that the dream is telling him to disobey God's law because this is God's baby Mary is carrying, and he is to name God's baby, which, of course, means that he is to adopt God's baby because the naming of a child meant that Joseph was making that child his child, too. He is to go ahead and marry Mary, adopt God's baby, name him "God saves" and raise him as his own son.

Talk about pressure. On the one hand, say it was just a dream, it didn't mean anything; follow the law, divorce Mary quietly and get on with your life as a carpenter and let Dad find you another wife. Simple. On the other hand, believe the dream, believe the angel in the dream, break the law, receive the criticism and mocking of your entire family and village, marry this woman who is pregnant with **God's** child, name him "God saves," which means you really believe all this stuff – you don't name a child "God saves" unless you really believe he is God's child – you are adopting God's child as your own and you are going to raise God's child as your own, which, to me, is an amazing thought. What if you mess up? What if you spank God's child when God doesn't want you to?

So those are your choices: simple – obey the law, divorce Mary and let *her* raise “God’s son,” or, incredibly complicated – break the law, marry Mary, and take a chance on getting struck by lightning every time to discipline “God’s son.” If you ask your family, your friends, your rabbi for advice, they’ll all tell you not to trust the dream. It’s a *dream*, for goodness’ sake. If you divorce Mary and go on with your life, everyone will say you did the right thing.

Still, what if the dream is right? What if the angel is real? What if, against all common sense, Mary is as pure as you thought she was, and this child really is God’s way of doing something completely new? Could you abandon your dream? Could you ignore the call to partner with Mary in raising the one who will save God’s people?

We all know how the story ends, the decision Joseph makes. He chooses faith over common sense. He chooses grace over law. He chooses to take Mary as his wife and to take all of the criticism of his family, friends and village. He chooses to take the child as his, and yet, not his. He names him Jesus – God saves – which means Joseph steps out in faith, and, like Abraham, trusts God to take him wherever God has planned for him to go. You know, Matthew draws some pretty clear parallels between Joseph and the biggest names of the Old Testament. There is a parallel between Joseph and Abraham here. Joseph, like Abraham, leaves everything that makes any sense and follows God where God chooses, even when Joseph doesn’t know where that is. In the next chapter, Matthew shows us that Joseph is like Moses, taking his family down to Egypt and back again on a double exodus.

We don’t know what finally happens to Joseph. He is there when Jesus is twelve and his parents take him to Jerusalem for Passover. Eighteen years later when Jesus begins his ministry, Joseph is gone. He has evidently died. But he died knowing that he did the right thing when he trusted the dream, trusted the angel, and broke the law by not divorcing Mary.

Joseph is a great model of faith. We, too, have been called to put our faith in a dream, rather than in common sense. To believe that a baby born in a manger is the Son of God... to believe that when he grows up and is crucified on a cross, that was actually to remove our sins from us... to believe that three days later he was actually brought back to life... and in his resurrection the door of heaven was opened for us all... that’s pretty amazing stuff, quite a dream! Even the apostle Paul admits that, too the rest of the world, this sounds like foolishness.

Joseph is a model for us: a model of courage, a model of faith, a model of grace. Someone really should write a song.