

We Can Choose a Better Way

If you were given the opportunity to meet any person in the first Christmas story, who would you choose? It's not easy to decide, is it? There are so many fascinating people.

Herod, that wicked evil king, squatting on the throne of Israel, insanely jealous lest a baby steal his glory.

The Magi – the Wise ones from the east. Who were they? Where did they come from? Were they astrologers? How did they know about the star?

The Innkeeper – I can see him in my mind's eye. A good man, harried, frustrated to turn away business. Did he ever discover who he turned away?

The Shepherds – Here's something you probably didn't know. Nearly all the shepherds in modern day Israel are teenagers – many of them girls. There is every reason to think that the shepherds were not the old men of tradition but teenagers who were 15 or 16 years old.

There are so many others. Anna the Prophetess. Simeon who took the baby Jesus in his arms and blessed his parents.

And then there is Mary. Luke wrote his story about her. Wouldn't you like to meet the mother of Jesus? I would

But there's someone else I'd like to meet even more. He is the forgotten man of Christmas. Matthew wrote his story about him. His name is Joseph. He is the husband of Mary and the foster father of Jesus. He's the person from the first Christmas story I would most like to meet.

When I call Joseph "the forgotten man of Christmas," that's not an exaggeration. Not much is said about him in the Bible. Not many sermons are preached about him. As a matter of fact, there's just not much written about Joseph at all.

Let me briefly list for you the things we know about Joseph.

His father was Jacob.

His family hometown was Bethlehem in Judea but he lived in Nazareth in Galilee. That meant that Joseph and Mary had to travel about 95 miles in order to register for the census.

He is from the royal line of David. The genealogy that we looked at on the first Sunday of Advent makes that clear.

He was a carpenter by trade.

He was a poor man. We know that because when he and Mary presented Jesus in the temple, they brought a turtledove to sacrifice. Jews only did that when they could not afford a lamb.

He was a religious man, a devout keeper of the Law, a fact that we will look at more closely in just a minute.

How old was Joseph? We don't know the answer for sure but some writers say that he was a young man, maybe around 17. Others say he was an older man who had children already, so that would explain Mary's other children, and so she could remain a virgin forever in the eyes of the church.

We heard Matthew tell Joseph's story this morning in our scripture lesson.

What our version calls engaged, the older versions of scripture call “betrothed.” It refers to an ancient Jewish marriage custom. In those days most marriages were arranged by the parents – with or without their children’s approval. The two sets of parents would meet and draw up a formal marriage contract. When the contract was signed, the man and woman were legally “pledged” to each other. This period of betrothal would last up to a year, at the end of which period they were formally married in a public wedding ceremony.

Now that sounds like our practice of engagement, doesn’t it, but there were some major differences. In the first place the “pledge” was considered as sacred as marriage itself. During that year, the couple were called husband and wife but they didn’t live together. If the man died during that year, the woman would be considered a widow even though the wedding ceremony had never taken place. The only way to break the betrothal was through a legal divorce.

To be “pledged” to each other was the same thing as being married, except that you could not live together until the wedding ceremony took place. The whole idea was that the one year waiting period was meant to be a time for testing commitment and faithfulness.

This is where the story gets interesting. According to Deuteronomy 22:20-21, if a woman was found to be pregnant during the betrothal, that could only mean she had been unfaithful to her husband, in which case the Law commanded that she be stoned to death.

Now Mary turned up pregnant. Joseph only knows one thing for sure. He’s not the father.

What words describe a man at a time like this? Anger. Confusion. Frustration. Embarrassment. Shame. Rage. Disappointment.

What did he say to her? What did she say to him? Did she tell him about the angel Gabriel? If she did, can you blame him for not believing her?

Did he say to her, “Mary, how could you? You were pledged to me. We were going to get married. I was going to build a little house for us in Nazareth. Mary, how could you do this? Why, Mary, Why? I kept myself for you. why couldn’t you keep yourself for me?”

I think Joseph cried harder that day than he had ever cried in his life.

Put yourself in his shoes. You’re in love and suddenly your girl friend turns up pregnant. You aren’t the father but you don’t know who is. What do you do?

Joseph was an observant Jew and under the Law he had the right to divorce Mary for unfaithfulness. In fact, the law forbade him to marry her under those circumstances.

Here is the greatness of Joseph. He loved her even though he thought she had been unfaithful to him. This is how verse 19 puts it: Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man (that means he wanted to do what was right in the eyes of God, and did not want to expose her to public disgrace (that means that although he thought she had been unfaithful, he still didn’t want to humiliate her), he decided to divorce her quietly.

In those days, a man could get a divorce in two ways. First, he could get a public divorce by going before a judge at the gate of the city. That would mean that the whole town would know about Mary’s shame. Second, he could get a private divorce by giving her the papers in the presence of two witnesses.

It is entirely to Joseph's credit that he chose to do it privately, and thus spare Mary the humiliation of a public divorce.

Having made his decision...he didn't do it. He had every legal and moral right to divorce Mary but he just couldn't do it. As one writer put it, there was a "short but tragic struggle between his legal conscience and his love." He hesitated, waited, thought long and hard. Day after day he pondered the matter. Time was running out. With each passing day, it became more obvious that Mary was pregnant.

Late at night he lay in bed staring into the blackness, wondering what to do.

Then one night it happened. He had a dream and in the dream God spoke to him.

An angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

To us, this seems strange. But not to Joseph. God often spoke to people through dreams in scripture. It was one way God used in those ancient days of communicating with people.

It worked. Joseph needed assurance. He couldn't marry Mary until he was sure it was all right.

He had to know the truth. God met him at the point of his need at exactly the right moment. He told Joseph the one thing he most wanted to hear: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

The angel is not finished yet: She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. The angel explains just enough and nothing more. The baby is "from the Holy Spirit. Nothing more is said. We are not told how the conception of Jesus took place. It remains one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith.

Dr. Christine J. Hong says this in her commentary on Matthew 1:18-25

"This story always raises a question for me. Why did it take divine intervention for Joseph to choose the better way? It took a vision and a celestial being for Joseph not to abandon his partner. Part of me is frustrated with Joseph. It took the hand of God for him to choose a better way; however, when I reflect upon my frustration, I realize in many ways we are each Joseph.

Each day we are faced with opportunities to do and be better in our relationships with one another and the world. Yet, when we are faced with opportunities to put our privilege and power at risk – to do what is right – we often decline to engage. Risk discomforts power.

Too often, she says, I witness white folks evade doing the right things in justice work. When the opportunity rises for white folks to do and say the right thing, which ultimately puts their relationships, jobs or reputations at risk with other white folks, polite excuses arise – excuses that claim to "Make room" for Black, Indigenous People of color voices by declining to use their own voices. Why is it that room for people of color is made only when it serves the interests of white folks taking the least amount of risk? How about risking solidarity with us? I sometimes wonder about and wish for divine intervention in these moments. What would happen if the divine would intervene and demand white folks take the better way? Why should doing the right thing take divine intervention?

I wonder about Mary and Joseph's relationship in the aftermath of the dream. What was in Mary's heart and on her tongue as Joseph told her about the dream that changed everything? What did Mary's face look like as Joseph confessed that saving her and the baby took the work of a divine dream and command? I hope he eventually realized that doing right by her shouldn't have necessitated divine

intervention. I hope we might be people who do not need convincing that there is a better way. Let's choose the better way and risk solidarity with one another.

Let's look at our art on the front of your bulletin – It is entitled The Courageous Choice by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She says this about her art –

When Joseph learns that his engaged has turned into a scandal, he decides to dismiss Mary quietly. While this choice may seem like a compassionate one, it's also a passive choice, one with little cost of Joseph but great consequences to Mary. As an unmarried mother, she and her child would be incredibly vulnerable, shunned by society, perhaps cut off from family support and resources. This choice means Joseph's reputation remains unharmed while pregnant Mary will live on with mounting shame and threats cast upon her.

While Joseph is thinking about all of this, perhaps deliberating about how he will delicately manage the social perceptions of this unexpected turn in his life, an angel comes to him in his dreams. What I find most interesting is that the angel doesn't command Joseph; instead he simply says, "Don't be afraid." He essentially says, "Don't be afraid of the social stigma. Don't be afraid to become a parent through adoption. Don't be afraid to experience a love greater than you have ever known. Don't be afraid to make the courageous choice, the one that will not only change your life, but the lives of Mary and Jesus and so many generations who will come after you."

In this image, I've captured Joseph in the liminal space where his dreams will soon shape his reality. He rests his head on a folded blanket which represents the woven tapestry of his ancestors who also made difficult choices for good. Gold interconnecting lines, like the roots and branches of a family tree, envelop him, symbolizing the beautiful web of regeneration that will come from his courage.

When Joseph awakes, he once again has the courage to choose the better way. He chooses to stay with Mary, to become an adoptive parent. He chooses peace over violence, grace over condemnation. Like Mary, he chooses to say, "yes".

I want to close with a poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled, "Instructions for a Hard Choice

First, you must take a deep breath.
Let oxygen dance through your lungs.
Exhale it slowly. Allow the hurt, the shame,
the anger to rise up in you. Let your mind run wild,
like a million loose horses. Let the narratives unfold, unroll,
a river of choppy water. Ask yourself how you got here.
Look down at your feet. Roll your shoulders back. Remember who you are.
Take another deep breath. Then, walk it back to the beginning.

Instead of looking at your feet, look at hers. Imagine where she stands. Imagine what he needs.
Drive the river of false stories in your mind.
Turn rushing water into a dry creek bed, certainly not clean enough to drink.
Call the horses. Bring them home.
Watch as they shake off the dust of the day. Name what you're feeling.
Inhale again.

Now you are ready to choose a better way.

As we reflect on the Christmas story through Joseph's experience, may we, too, have the courage to choose a better way. Amen.