

SERMON: Do Not Be Afraid
TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25

Just imagine what all his friends are saying, as they laugh at the comic tragedy in which Joseph plays the fool. “What has happened to him?” his family questions in disbelief. “How could he be so gullible?” The townspeople are shocked and appalled that this well-respected, upstanding citizen could be fooled by a pretty face with the wiles of the devil. They all shake their heads in dismay at his downfall, as he wed the woman whom he should have had stoned to death for her unfaithfulness. Even his earlier decision to “dismiss her quietly” is more than anyone would have expected of him.

There are very few men - or women, for that matter - who would be willing to set themselves up for such ridicule and humiliation. I would venture to say that most of us are more afraid of looking gullible than anything else. Especially for someone like Joseph, who was accustomed to being highly regarded and respected, this would have been quite a blow.

It was hard enough to decide to walk away and let her live. But then, to be faithful to his promise to marry her - when it was clear to the whole world that she had not been faithful to him, well, such people are few and far between.

But an angel appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

So, that’s what this incredibly faithful and courageous man does. The sad part is that we rarely hear about him again, except after the new family escapes to Egypt and then when they take Jesus to the temple as a young boy. And at Christmastime, we sing about Mary, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men - even the animals, but rarely is Joseph mentioned.

He’s there, of course. He’s in all our nativity scenes, faithfully but quietly, standing guard over Mary and the baby. And I have to wonder what he’s thinking.

Michael Card is a theologian, an author, and a singer and songwriter who wrote and performed a beautiful piece titled, *Joseph’s Song*, in which he imagines

the ponderings of Joseph. “How could it be? This baby in my arms, sleeping now so peacefully. The son of God, the angels said. How could it be? Lord, I know he’s not my own. Not of my flesh, not of my bone. Still, Father, let this baby be the son of my love. Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours. How can a man be father to the Son of God? Lord, for all my life I’ve been a simple carpenter. How can I raise a King? How can I raise a King?”

Joseph may be the original unsung hero. And even though the angel told him, “Do not be afraid,” I think it’s safe to say that he was. For a man in that society to go against everyone he knew in order to protect a woman he barely knew; for a man to keep his promise to a woman who clearly had already broken her promise to him - these were actions that would essentially cost him his manhood and every ounce of respect he’d ever been given. We know he was doing the right thing, the respectable thing, the most manly thing ever. But only he and Mary and God knew it at the time.

Greater than his fear of losing favor with others was his desire to gain favor with God.

One theologian defined well the costs, but also emphasized the benefits of Joseph's faithful and risky act. "Joseph and Mary show us a faithful response to the present and coming Kingdom of God. Righteousness entails humility, the willingness to set aside deeply held assumptions, the ability to abandon our own plans and step into God's disturbing, dizzying new thing, the strength to take a stand and make a choice that runs counter to common wisdom or cultural norms or even religious rules, the courage to imagine that God is at work even when we are reeling from the loss of what had been our hoped for future.

Joseph could have ignored the angel's instructions, chalked up that night visitation as only a strange dream. He could have dismissed Mary quietly and still been considered righteous, perhaps even more so for his unwillingness to allow Mary to suffer the deserved consequences of her perceived actions. God, no doubt, would not have been thwarted and Jesus would have still been born. Joseph, however, would have missed witnessing the coming of Emmanuel. Joseph would have missed experiencing divine redemption firsthand. Joseph would have missed nurturing the Son of God's growth in the world. Joseph would have missed knowing without a doubt that God's ways are not our ways and God's hopes and imagination far exceed our own. Joseph would have missed the Kingdom of

Heaven right in front of him, his righteousness intact, his plans accomplished, but his life not nearly as abundant as God had planned for him. Instead Joseph took a risk and embraced God's dream." (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, December 20, 2019)

Living a life of faith is about facing challenges. For Joseph to be faithful meant that he would face a multitude of challenges. It meant risking his reputation, his relationships, his own long-held assumptions of right and wrong. It meant risking his ideas about traditional family.

In fact, it occurs to me that the story of Joseph challenges our own ideas about the traditional family. I grew up in a non-traditional family; my parents divorced when I was very young, so I have no memories of living with my father. My father was someone who took me and my siblings every Saturday - just for the day.

It wasn't so common in the 60's and 70's as it is today. So, for a long time, I lived with that idea of being from a *broken* home. And I think that may be why I have always been drawn to the nativity. I have a large collection of them, keeping

in front of me that image of the traditional family. Since I didn't grow up in one, I was determined that when I got married, I would make a traditional family for my children. For many years, we did. Mom, Dad, a boy and a girl. But now, I'm divorced, as well.

I'm sure we have a whole room full of stories of the non-traditional families we know. Step-parents, adoptive parents, single moms or dads, grandparents raising grandchildren, surrogate parents, two moms, two dads, mixed races and cultures, combinations too many to count. As the very human, earthly father to a child of the Divine, Joseph teaches us that what matters in making us *family* has nothing to do with biology. What matters is relationships based on love and commitment.

Finally, I believe that Linus, of the Peanuts Gang, is a shining example of faithfulness, as is Joseph. Linus is my favorite character because he wasn't afraid to talk about his faith or live his faith. I learned something just this year about Linus that I never knew before.

I read an article titled, *Just Drop the Blanket*. In it the author points out that just as Linus is sharing the scripture to answer Charlie Brown's question of what Christmas is all about, he drops the security blanket that he carries with him at all times. Just as he speaks the words, "Fear not," as the angels told the shepherds, at that very moment, he drops the blanket. The article interprets this tiny detail: "Looking at it now, it is pretty clear what Charles Schultz was saying, and it's so simple it's brilliant. The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears. The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves. The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to Him instead." (Jason Soroski, "Just Drop the Blanket: The Moment You Never Noticed in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, crosswalk.com, December 14, 2015)

That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown. That's what Joseph is all about. That's what faith is all about. DO NOT BE AFRAID.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.