

SERMON: Above and Beyond
TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25

12-18-22

Best actor in a supporting role. That's the award that Joseph would get if Matthew's story of Jesus' birth was a movie. And that's saying something. If movie producers had used the script from Luke's version of the story, Joseph would make a brief cameo appearance as the person engaged to Mary and the one who was descended from the family of David. Mark's gospel doesn't include a birth narrative at all, but begins with John the Baptist preparing the way. And John writes not of a baby in a manger, but of the Word that became flesh and the light shining in the darkness.

So, let's take this opportunity to look more closely at Joseph. He is immediately a likable character. He's a "righteous man," and "unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace." Upon learning that she was with child, strong and steady Joseph was magnanimous in his resolve to "dismiss her quietly."

Of course, “quietly” was key. Because if their friends and neighbors and temple priests found out about it, outrage would prevail. Mary would be accused of adultery and Joseph would be expected to have her stoned to death. If he had tried to dismiss her with the whole world watching, someone else would have likely done the stoning – and very possibly done it to both of them.

But an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

The way Matthew tells it, Joseph acted immediately. He didn’t question it. He didn’t rub his eyes and splash water on his

face and try to make sense of his dream. He didn't pace the floor, wondering what to do. He didn't sit down with paper and pencil to weigh the pros and cons of such unconventional action. He didn't shake his fist in the air and question God, "Why me? What more do you want from me?" He didn't even get down on his knees and pray. Or did he?

It really doesn't matter, whether Joseph acted immediately or whether his decision came after a long and arduous process of struggle and discernment. In the end, he did as God called him to do. He went ABOVE AND BEYOND what righteousness required.

As one theologian commented, "Christmas has been difficult from the beginning. Just ask Joseph. He is committed to Mary in a legal way, and legal action would be required to end the relationship if some problem should arise. And there is a problem, a problem growing bigger every week. Mary's pregnancy is obvious to anyone, but how she became pregnant makes sense to no one. Now Joseph has to decide what to do about the marriage. A righteous man, who is familiar with the law and the Scriptures,

Joseph knows there are two choices: disgrace Mary by filing for divorce or have her stoned to death. That's what the Scripture says. Isn't that what a righteous man would do, follow the Scriptures?"

"Joseph instead reads the Scripture through the lens of mercy and grace. Joseph reads Scripture as if he knows something about the God to whom Scripture points. It's all problematic, of course, but Joseph refuses to turn from the difficulty. Sifting through the many layers, Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly, save her the public humiliation, and keep the baby safe. It is a big step beyond what convention would suggest, but Joseph is willing to do that." (John Wurster, *Looking Into the Lectionary, Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2022*)

Reading scripture through the lens of mercy and grace. Imagine! It seems Jesus did inherit something from his earthly father after all. The baby in the manger was not born from adherence to the law, but from God's abundant love. The baby in the manger is God's love incarnate. God's love, in the flesh.

Instead of following the letter of the law, Joseph and Jesus both followed the law of love. Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the words of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:43-44)

This was not a way to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, as Jesus himself said he would do. To fulfill the law is to go ABOVE AND BEYOND the call to love.

When you think about the choices, the decisions that Joseph and Mary had to make – how they had to choose between what humans expected of them and what God called them to do – it can bring a profound sense of relief that we are spared such dilemmas. Or are we?

In fact, we are called to face similar challenges more often than we realize. When my sister was a teenager she received a stereo for her birthday. Less than a year went by and she

announced to my mother that she wanted to sell the stereo and give the money to a mission project that the church was supporting. She had wanted that stereo for a long time, and my mother had to pinch pennies to afford such a gift. So my sister's generosity was not applauded, but frowned upon as unreasonable and unnecessarily extravagant. She may have felt called by God to do this good deed, but the people around her thought her foolish.

God came to earth as a baby. Utterly helpless and dependent on others for all his needs. His life was threatened then and throughout his ministry. All he wanted was to give himself away, and eventually he gave his life. Going ABOVE AND BEYOND, God sacrificed his only son out of his love for the whole world, when none of us deserved it.

Joseph went ABOVE AND BEYOND what the law required. He went ABOVE AND BEYOND what anyone expected of him. He

went ABOVE AND BEYOND out of his faithfulness and love for God.

So many of us *spend* above and beyond our budgets at this time of year. We go above and beyond in decorating and entertaining and running ourselves ragged. But I would challenge us to take some time to ponder how we might go above and beyond in showing God's love to those who need it most.

If only angels would speak to us in our dreams and tell us what to do. If only we would listen.

Like Joseph, may we answer God's call in faithfulness and love for God and for our neighbor... to the glory of God!

AMEN.