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First Presbyterian Church  
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Advent 3, Year A  
Matthew 1:18-25

### **The Birth of Jesus the Messiah**

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”  
which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

### **“Into the Mess”**

Our scripture today moves us closer to Christmas when we finally get to hear a story about Jesus’ birth. We don’t know a whole lot about Joseph because 1: He never speaks in the Bible and 2: he doesn’t get nearly as much screen time as Mary does. This is the only year in our 3-year cycle of scripture readings that the spotlight turns away from Mary and towards Joseph.

So who is Joseph? We know he’s descended from the line of David because Matthew notes that in his genealogy. This likely means Joseph is a fine upstanding Jew from a very well-known and distinguished family. We also know he’s a carpenter. But beyond that, we really don’t know much for certain about Joseph and can only speculate as to his character, which most people assume is above

board. We also assume that Joseph doesn't like to make waves, call attention to himself, or venture too close to controversy. Joseph, always the non-speaking part in the church Christmas pageant, is also hailed for being somewhat of a hero since he didn't leave Mary out to pasture when hearing she was pregnant, but instead chose to marry her. I think it's safe to say that like most of us, Joseph wants an orderly life, just something normal and uncomplicated.

But this story also raises a question for me – and also highlights something I think we have in common with Joseph, which is this: why did it take divine intervention for Joseph to choose the better way? Why did it take a dream and an angel for Joseph not to abandon his partner? Part of me is frustrated with Joseph; that it took the hand of God to steer Joseph in the right direction.

Until I reflect on my own frustration, and realize that in some ways, we are all Joseph. Why does it often take something earth shattering for us to do the right thing? For example, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder everyone seemed to take to the street to protest. Politicians who had never spoken up about race issues took to the streets; sleepy little towns who don't want their boat rocked took to the street; and even in the neighborhood of my former church, a very wealthy white suburb of St. Louis, there were protests where there never had been before even though St. Louis had its own version of George Floyd with which to reckon. Other Black men had been killed at the hands of law enforcement, so why did it take Floyd's murder for people to risk solidarity and make room for Black voices to be heard?

So part of me is frustrated with Joseph, with humanity, and with myself. I mean, every day we're faced with opportunities to put our privilege and power at risk – to do what is right – but we often decline to engage.

In reflecting on this frustration, I also wonder about Mary's frustration. What was on her heart and tongue when she heard Joseph say it took a dream and an angel for him to change his mind and not "send her away quietly" – which could have meant a life of prostitution or death by stoning? What did her face look like as he confessed that saving her and her baby took the work of divine intervention and a command? After all, Joseph was her fiancé, and while she likely didn't know him like fiancées know one another these days, they were also for all intents and

purposes already married. Did he trust her so little that it took the hand of God to convince him that there was a better way to act?

I don't know about you, but I was shocked to hear – as we heard in today's call to confession -- that it only takes a 1/10 of a second to form a first impression of someone. Todorov said: "We decide very quickly whether a person possesses many of the traits we feel are important, such as likeability and competence, even though we have not exchanged a single word with them." And not only do we make snap judgements, Willis and Todorov found that ". . . if given more time, people's fundamental judgment (about faces) did not change. Observers simply became more confident in their judgments as the duration lengthened."

Maybe this is why we only have one chance at a good first impression.

But what happens when we don't give that second impression a chance? How do those split second decisions affect not only us, but everyone around us? Imagine if Joseph had relied on his first impression of what Mary told him? What if he had woken up from the dream and still didn't believe Mary's story like Gabriel told him to? What then?

In doing some research for this sermon I came across one of those books that didn't make it into the Bible. Written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it depicts a much harsher version of Joseph's pain. In the Protoevangelium of James, Joseph sees Mary's swollen belly, throws himself on the ground, strikes his own face, and cries bitterly. He wonders long and hard how to respond, and asks Mary why she has betrayed both him and God so cruelly.

It's not that hard to imagine a scene like that playing out in real life between Joseph and Mary. So it bears asking: How would the Christmas story unfold if Joseph had allowed his first impression to be his only impression? And what would that impact have on us today?

Charlotte Akers writes about the impact of short-term thinking in her article "Seven Generations Thinking". Seven generation thinking, which is an ancient Iroquois philosophy, emphasizes how we have been impacted by seven generations before us, and how our decisions today can positively or negatively impact seven generations after us. But do we stop to think that long-term? No. Akers writes that while we may be able to think about our children's future lives,

and maybe their children's future lives, we struggle to think much beyond that. This is reflected, she writes, "in many cultural instances: governmental systems often work on a 4 or 5 year cycle; business plans look to the next quarter; and social media is so innately biased towards short-termism, 3 seconds is considered a 'view' on a video. As a result, in politics, marketing, consumerism and even our online identities, short-term successes are rewarded over long-term wellness."

Seventh generation thinking, though, wants us to move past that and start to take into consideration that with every decision we make, we must consider how it will impact those seven generations ahead of us. Will this decision sustain our descendants? Will this decision damage our descendants? How do those snap judgments we're making impact future generations?

Now, if it's just too much for you to think about 7 generations into the future, look at it this way and place yourself in the middle. Go backwards to your parents, your grandparents, and your great-grandparents, as well as (going forwards) to your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren, reflect on the impact they've had on you and you're having on them. What are the long-term repercussions of decisions made or impressions formed? Seven generation thinking should encourage us to consider the possible impacts of our present-day actions, but it should also motivate us to appreciate the amazing fact that what we choose to do today, will echo past our own short lifespan.

Which takes us back to Joseph.

What if Joseph had refused? What repercussion would that decision have made? Because Joseph is pivotal. As Matthew makes clear, the Messiah must come from the house and lineage of David, and so it rests on Joseph to give his name and his legitimacy to Mary's child. If Joseph refused, the fulfillment came to a halt. In other words, God's plan for salvation required Joseph, a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy, to choose precisely what he feared and likely dreaded the most. That interruption in his life – and note that angels always disrupt the status quo – was also an invitation to choose a better way. To choose peace over violence; and grace over condemnation. And so just like Mary, he said "yes", even though his gut told him, "no." When faced with the opportunity to put his reputation, privilege and power at risk, to do what was right, Joseph did what was right.

In the Spring, when we were getting ready for our travels through some of the national parks, I came across an annual pass that Yellowstone National Park is offering this year to commemorate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. By making a \$1500 donation, one can receive an annual pass to the park for this year and also an annual pass valid in the year 2172, 150 years from now. Now why in the world would you do that when you guaranteed not to need it? Because by doing so you're emphasizing the importance of preservation both now and for future generations.

And so while Joseph's story frustrates me, it also gives me hope because Joseph, like me, and maybe like you, struggles, offers a cautious yes, is perhaps a little too ambivalent and whole lot scared. I'm glad he struggled, because I struggle, too. And maybe you do, as well, because choosing the better way doesn't always come naturally. And it doesn't always benefit me, or you. But does it benefit future generations? Perhaps that's the question we should all ask.

No wonder the angel Gabriel's first words to Joseph were, "Do not be afraid." If we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear, too. *Do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid when God's work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about righteousness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed. Do not be afraid when God asks you to love something or someone more than your own spotless reputation. Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, or the impossible.

Do not be afraid of the mess. Because the mess is the place where God is born.

Amen.

Sources:

Sanctified Art, commentary on Matthew 1:18-25

Journey with Jesus, debie Thomas, "Into the Mess", December 15, 2019

<https://www.yellowstone.org/inheritance-pass/>

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