

## Matthew 1:18-25

18 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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Luke is everyone's favorite Christmas story with shepherds and angels, but Matthew is vital for a fully developed picture of the Christmas story. Matthew presents the birth of Jesus from Joseph's perspective, whereas Luke's account is oriented toward Mary. In Matthew, Joseph plays a more significant role in the birth story.

He is not the unnoticed figure in the nativity or the part in the Christmas pageant that no one really strives for. Better to be Mary, an angel, a shepherd, magi, or even a sheep.

In the Matthew nativity, Joseph is the proud father of Jesus, passing out cigars and declaring, "That's my boy."

But Joseph had to overcome significant challenges to live into his role as a proud father.

We know the story: Joseph and Mary were engaged. But did you know that in those days, it was an arranged marriage negotiated by the families? This one was probably a long-distance arranged marriage. Still, in any case, it was a legally binding contract. Quite often, love was not present at the bargaining stage but just might become the bedrock of the relationship over time, as is the case in arranged marriages today.

Even though Joseph and Mary were not living together at the time, they were pledged in marriage to each other. These young teens were promised to each other and would be married at a specified time. And make no mistake, engagements then were not like they are now, when either party can back out at their sole desire with almost no consequences. To back out would involve legal proceedings, finances, and, not to mention, shame and disgrace.

Of course, in Mary and Joseph's story, there is the complication that Mary is pregnant through a gift of the Holy Spirit. Even though God's request shook her to her core, with fear, she chose to

believe the angel, that this was God's plan for her and said, "Let it be so, according to your word." She chose to believe God. What will Joseph do with the news? Will he do the same?

Joseph finds out. Mary probably tells him what has happened while she is visiting her cousin Elizabeth. What is Joseph to do? He is righteous, seeking to do the right thing, but not just for himself, but for Mary and all involved. While no option seems right, that is something we are all confronted with from time to time. We know the rules, but they just really don't fit. Let's look at Joe's main options. He can't really ignore it. It will soon be obvious.

He could make a big public scene and accuse her of adultery. While scholars debate how prevalent stoning was in that time, it was a possibility that she would be found to have committed adultery, and suffer the punishment for that was as severe as stoning. And if not, there would be perpetual shame and disgrace for her and her family.

This was too harsh for Joseph, who did not want that level of violence and public shame for Mary, yet he could not deal with infidelity.

He decides the right thing to do is to end this betrothal quietly and not make a big deal of it, but people would still know, and the demon shame and gossip would be loose in their world. It might well be assumed that he is the father. He is willing to risk that, as he would take the shame upon himself by doing this. It is like his declaration, "It's on me." It's not Mary's fault. Let it be.

In doing so, we see that his righteousness is built on sacrifice, mercy, and compassion, and gazing into the future, we know that these will become the heart of Jesus' mission.

And for him, it seemed the best choice available, and that is what he decided to do. All settled, so off to bed. Then an angel comes to Joseph in his dream and says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your bride, she is pregnant, and that is by the power of God."

I always pause when I hear "Do not be afraid" when it involves God, because it usually means something huge and life-altering is going on here. That fits the Birth of Jesus perfectly, and what it will do to the lives of Joseph and Mary.

So, Joseph chooses to obey God and take Mary as his wife. And that means he is prepared to publicly declare the child whom he will name Jesus is his son.

That willingness was enormous for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Once, when I was in Huntsville, Alabama, where my foster father worked in a small shop in the mall as a stamp dealer, the following occurred. One day, when I was visiting another shopkeeper with him, he pointed to me and, with some pride, said, "That's my boy." That's what Joseph said when he named Jesus. He publicly acknowledged Jesus as his son. "That's my boy." And since Joseph is a descendant of David, Jesus is one too, from the house of David. Though there might have been some talk in the village about an early birth, the problem seems to have been solved.

My friend Tom McFarlane, who has led the group I go on retreat with each August for some 30-plus years, is a pastoral counsellor. He said that one thing every man longs for is to be blessed by his father.

On Tuesday, I went with Marlene and our friend Judi to The Music Box in Cleveland to Peter Mayer's Harmony version of his annual Christmas Concert, Marlene and I have attended these concerts for twenty-three years. I really enjoy his music, and he is my favorite Christian musician, not to mention he was the lead guitarist for Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer band.

Three of his songs come to me when I think about this passage of scripture. One is "Hey, Joseph," which elevates Joseph to a significant character in the Christmas drama as they go toward Bethlehem.

The second is "Harmony", which sings of a problematic relationship between a father and a son. The son is still working through the issues, even after his father's death. It points out the essential importance of a father-son relationship.

And third, "Ghost of a Son", which is a retelling of the prodigal son. When the son returns home from begging, expecting a difficult time, knowing the damage he has caused, instead, his father runs out to him and exclaims, "My son, My Life!" The son says, "And all of my shame, his arms had undone." Then the father said, "Welcome home, you are mine. My ghost of a son, your name will be mine forever, and now on." His father blesses him.

On his album "Long Story Short", Peter sings that song with his son, Brendan, and he also sings the song "Harmony" with his son. When he sings "Harmony", he mentions his relationship with his father.

I came to know of Peter through his work with Jimmy Buffett. And you know that I am a big Jimmy Buffett fan, but it is not just the music that makes him so dear to my heart; it is the experience of going to concerts with my family, especially my son. We have been on more than 50 road trips and concerts, including tailgating and traveling. I associate times with my love for my son. An enormous amount of my love for Jimmy Buffett reflects my love for my son and our experiences together. "That's my boy, my son, my life."

That's what Joseph proclaims, "That's my boy" and "My son, my life" when he names the child Jesus. He declares for all to hear, "That's my boy!" His declaration by naming Jesus is for all to hear, "That's my boy."

Scholars talk about what Jesus learned from Mary, but I think Jesus learned compassion and mercy from Joseph, who declared, "That's my boy," or "My son, my life." I think that's what gave Jesus the inspiration for the story of the prodigal son. It was not only his bond with his heavenly father, but also his earthly father, and the love he had shown him by naming him and declaring him "my son."

Notice Joseph doesn't stop being righteous because he didn't denounce Mary. Joseph grew in wisdom and stature by making the hard discovery that sometimes we need God's leading when there seems to be no good choice between the rock and a hard place.

When our immediate rush to righteousness doesn't work, we need to think deeper when we find ourselves in times of trouble. God is saying, "Do the best you can to seek another path. And I will be with you to help you."

We are called to see righteousness in terms of compassion and mercy and see how that makes the decision fit with God's plans. We have learned from Jesus that God doesn't want people stoned to death for a mistake, even a serious one, even the sin of adultery.

God's goal is to love all people home to God, and that's why Joseph and Mary's Baby is so important. Jesus is the gift to us that brings us home to God. A gift that will tear down the wall sin builds between God and us, and between our neighbor and us, and even our personal obstacles, by experiencing God's love for us.

We can learn from Joseph that showing love and mercy are the heart of righteousness. And when we have a choice, we should act with mercy, love, and compassion. And when we think there is no choice, God calls us to look again to find a way to mercy, love, and compassion.

In this holiday season, is there any area of our lives where we need to act based on such a foundation? In a country torn by division and malicious untruth, we can point to Joseph's way of choosing God's loving acceptance and mercy as the ground of our relational lives.

It is the same love God has for us and to help us remember that we need to move Joseph to the front and center of the nativity set, standing there and telling everyone who comes, "That's my boy, my son, my life."

It is this kind of love revealed in the holy family that can save us from our sins of separation and estrangement. And if we listen carefully, we can hear God looking down from heaven with love, saying, about us "Those are my children."