Obedient Joseph: An Example of Faith

Christmas Eve T Matthew 1:18-25

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Christmas songs, hymns, and carols all sing about and teach us of different characters of the Christmas story. We have hymns about Mary, the baby Jesus, the wisemen, the angels and the shepherds.. But what about Joseph? We sing of the virgin Mary, who carried God in her womb. We sing of the wisemen, the angels, and the shepherds – how the angels told the shepherds watching their flocks by night that the Savior was to be found in Bethlehem. And how the wisemen from the east sought to worship the newborn King in the land of Judea. But what about Joseph? There aren’t any hymns with mention of Joseph. He’s sort of the forgotten character of the Christmas story! We learn much from these other characters – even serving as examples for us in our faith. But what can we learn from Joseph about faith?

Well, we can’t look to anything Joseph said to learn anything about him. Because Joseph is never cited to really say anything in Scripture! Joseph has no lines to say in Luke’s Gospel narrative, and not even in Matthew’s shorter Gospel read this evening. Joseph doesn’t have a clear confessional statement that’s echoed throughout our liturgies quite like Mary does. Joseph had no great Magnificat like Mary – “**My Soul Magnifies the Lord, and My spirit rejoices in God my savior.”** He doesn’t have a great statement of faith like Mary, where she accepts the virgin birth by saying, **“let it be done to me according to your Word.”** Rather than through words, Joseph’s fidelity to the Lord is expressed through His actions. Matthew tells of Joseph’s mercy and compassion to Mary and by extension, the baby Jesus.

Joseph’s mercy was on full display despite a difficult situation. You see, Joseph was engaged to Mary. When couples were engaged back then, that was as good as being married. But they couldn’t consummate the marriage sexually until they were officially married and blessed by God – as God’s law declares. If the couple were to split up before being married, they’d have to go through an official divorce.

So, when it became evident that Mary was with child, Joseph faced a tough decision. Mary’s life was in his hands. Joseph determined the path of justice for Mary, for her supposed adultery. Should he take, what seemed to him in the moment, a harlot to be his wife, overlooking justice altogether? Or, should he have her punished by being stoned to death for her adultery, which was the law’s punishment for the Jewish people? Or, Joseph could’ve sought an abortion for Mary – thus killing the innocent child and selfishly taking care of the problem – keeping the whole precarious situation from being known by the community. Out of His mercy and compassion towards Mary and her child, Joseph resolved to divorce her quietly, and not get the whole community involved. Thus, Joseph chose to save both Mother and child. It’s clear in Joseph’s actions that he loved Mary and didn’t want any harm to befall her. But He had to do something. Quiet divorce seemed like the most merciful, yet lawful thing to do.

We could imagine Joseph was afraid to take Mary as His wife. How couldn’t he? Matthew described Joseph as a ‘just’ man, meaning, he followed God’s law. He kept the Sabbath. He observed the correct ceremonial laws. He obeyed the Lord and meditated on His Law. He was a good man. He sought to do good and wanted no part of evil. His reputation among the community was one who obeyed God, and was fair to his neighbor. So, being with a pregnant woman to whom he wasn’t married yet put him in a difficult situation among his peers. He could lose His place and status in the community if He took Mary as His wife. In a sense, Joseph could lose his life. And that scared Joseph away from receiving his pregnant fiancé.

But then, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said – **“Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”** From God’s messenger, Joseph learned that his wife wasn’t a harlot, but she was the Mother of the Messiah! Mary hadn’t been unfaithful to him. Rather, she conceived the Savior of the World from the giver of life, from the Holy Spirit! Through Mary, God was to be born into the world! His name was to be called Jesus! He was the promised one who was to come and save God’s people from their sins! This fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah, **“the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and call His name Immanuel”**. Joseph knew the Scriptures. This was foretold long ago! And God had chosen obedient Joseph to be faithful to God, to listen to His word, to not fear, and to take Mary as his wife. He sacrificed his life – his reputation, status, well-being – to bring the Christ child into the world, so that Jesus may give up His life for the life of the world. In this way, Joseph showed what true love was – for through giving up his life to protect the life of Mary, and the life of Jesus – He gave safety to the woman pregnant with God. He obeyed the voice of the Lord over the voice of men. He was faithful to God, despite what the outside world thought of him. And through Joseph’s faithfulness, God came to be with us. As you could imagine, this announcement from the angel in his dream changed everything for Joseph!

So, Joseph took Mary as His wife. Because He trusted in God – even if that meant suffering the disgrace of society.

In this way, Joseph is a good example for us. Especially in today’s world. We can learn this from Joseph’s faith – obedience to God and what He commands takes precedence over what others may think about us. Whether that’s confessing God’s Law and order of creation in a world that wants to reject God’s ordering, or if that means spreading the Gospel without the fear of what our friends and family may think of us – even if that comes with the label of being too religious. We confess God in the face of unbelief.

Since God sent His Son Jesus to save His people from their sin, God invites faithfulness to Him. That’s why He came – to put to death the dark idols of our hearts and turn us toward the light of His Christ. To delight in His Law and live as true children of our Heavenly Father who loves and instructs us in godly living. We’ll see this visually soon, as the light that begins with the Christ candle in the Advent wreath, will spread to each one of you. But in a world increasingly hostile to anyone who follows God’s law like Joseph did, and is a righteous man like Joseph was, that person’s fidelity to God is being tested. And the world seeks to snuff out that light of Christ.

Faith is being tested - not only for the strong in faith, but even for the weak in faith. We all have family and friends we think of this time of year. We pray that they’d be faithful and remember that you can’t take the Christ out of Christmas, or the Mass out of Christmas for that matter. We wish they’d come to church, reject hardening their hearts to Jesus, and dust off an apathetic faith that rejects the Christ. But to receive Jesus, one must admit the ever-unpopular notion that we’re all damned before the Lord. And that’s why we need Jesus, our Immanuel who’s come to save us from our sins.

This is the one in whom we are to believe, trust, and fear above all else that we may have eternal life. Joseph believed in God, and His belief led him to act in a way that was obedient to His Lord.

C.H. Spurgeon was a preacher in England during the 1800’s. I heard that he once claimed that 98 percent of the people he met-- including the criminals he visited in England's prisons--told him that they believed the Bible to be true. But he said that the most of them had never made a personal, life-changing commitment to Jesus Christ. For them, "believe" was not an active verb.

But belief without action is dead. Belief is the cornerstone of faith and it is by grace that we are saved, not works. We are justified before God by faith alone, but as Luther said, faith is never alone. Faith leads to obedience. Faith obeys the word of God and longs to hear the soothing words of the Gospel – to hear of the Immanuel, the God with us, who was born to save us from our sins. Faith seeks refuge in God’s church week in and week out because the church is where the Immanuel, the God with us promises to give Himself. Jesus once came in flesh and blood born in Bethlehem, but now He comes to sinners through means of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. This Christ will soon be placed in our hands at this rail and received into our mouths, reassuring us with the promise that the body and blood he gives has been given and shed on the cross to take away your sins. He’s paid the punishment of the times of when we’ve been unfaithful to God. And He calls us to follow where He leads and guides – forsaking all cares of the world in favor of following His Son.

The Lord worked through the merciful and compassionate hero of Joseph to bring about the birth of God’s only begotten Son. The Heavenly Father chose Joseph be Jesus’ earthly father. His mercy and compassion flowed from His obedience to the Lord, whom He had absolute unwavering faith in. May Joseph serve as our example this Christmas season – a man of selflessness, willing to sacrifice everything in service to God’s purposes.

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