

December 14, 2025

Sermon Text

Matthew 1: 18-25 (NRSVue)

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 just 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.

Sermon Title: Afraid? Give Me Your Hand

We all have a family story that's shared with others that intersect with our life. Part of that story we experience directly, events that hardwire into our memory bank. Some of that story was given to us – generations ago, or events from our infant years – that feel like memory, but are really someone else's memory uploaded into our brains, with our imagination filling in the actual event. My story includes two events. I have one early memory from age 2, of peeking through a skeleton key hole at my mother rocking my new baby brother Tim to sleep in a rocking chair. Repeating that story to my mother, she looked shocked that I would have a memory from that young. But it's mine – no one else could have had that perspective on the scene, which I could describe to her in detail. But, there's another story that was told to me, creating a visual picture in my mind – my reciting "The Night Before Christmas" to my great aunt at the same age of 2, while turning the pages of a picture book of the poem my mother had read to me daily. I knew exactly when to turn the page. I imitated my mother's inflections, so exactly my Aunt Pearl swore up and down that at age two, I was a fluent reader. Now that's not my own memory but my mother's memory that was shared with me and is now part of my origin story about always having been

a reader. Our personal stories are a mishmash of ours and theirs, lived and shared.

The story of Jesus in the book of Matthew starts with a family story that isn't his, and yet becomes a part of his story. "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" With those opening words, the Jewish lineage of Jesus is outlined for the readers of this gospel. From the first patriarch, Abraham, all the way to the grandfather and human father of the infant Jesus. And yet, this family story has the unusual inclusion for that time and place of women's names. Not all the women in the family tree, but five women with an unusual common characteristic. Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was accused of prostitution and of defaming Judah's family name by being pregnant out of wedlock – which was true, but her father-in-law was the baby's father. Rahab, which tradition also names as a prostitute, who saved the Israelite spies as they checked out the enclosed city of Jericho, and subsequently saved her family by becoming part of the Israelite community. Ruth, the foreign woman from Moab, who risked scandal to sneak to Boaz in the middle of the night in male only space, and ends up also marrying into the line of Judah to birth a son who would be the grandfather of the great king, David. Bathsheba, the woman taken by King David into an extramarital affair through coercion, deception and murder, who was just another wife in his harem, becomes the mother of his heir Solomon. And finally, Mary, a young, unwed woman who finds out she's pregnant out of wedlock.

This family story includes five sexual scandals for their time and culture. Women whose lives were at risk to bear the next generation in the line of Abraham. The fifth woman whose life was also put at risk, asked to be the human vessel that would bring the Incarnated God to live with and among us. The God Incarnate wasn't just going to be in human form – he was coming into a family of kings – and suspected harlots. Jesus was scandalous from the very beginning of his story.

But we know little about the silent man at the intersection of this family and the divine, that would be a part of the journey, walking alongside Mary, also receiving words that tell him also to let go of his fear, let go of his assumptions and expectations, let go of his own personal safety. And that person in Jesus' story is his earthly father: Joseph.

Unlike Zechariah that we looked at a few weeks ago, whose voice was finally given back to him at the birth of this promised son, Joseph never was given a voice; he has no lines in this drama. What we know of Joseph is limited to

others telling about his actions, but also the observation of his emotions. And it is through his emotions, and the actions he takes in spite of them, that make him a powerful part of the story of Jesus.

Engagements to be married were long in first century Galilee. Joseph and Mary could have been engaged since she was 9 or 10 years of age. When she reached puberty, the families would start looking at a date when that engagement became formalized as a marriage, when it would actually be consummated. But until then, they were as good as married in the eyes of the fellow villagers. In the time of waiting, Mary was learning the skills to run a household; Joseph was continuing to learn how to make a living as a carpenter and probably had already built the house they would eventually live in together. They were religiously and legally bound by the promises of both families.

We aren't told how Joseph heard the news of his fiancée's pregnancy. However, we can speculate – since engaged people did not meet alone, Mary probably told her parents and they told Joseph. We never hear about her parents' response to the news, but this was a scandalous situation in the Middle East, even today, usually resulting in rejection and shunning. Even today in post-modern USA, this news is not always received with smiles and shouts "let's have a baby shower!" Matthew shares that "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, (Joseph) planned to divorce her quietly." This has been a little puzzling to me as a contemporary reader: given small village life and the public knowledge of personal lives, how do you divorce "quietly"? Eventually everyone would know she was pregnant if her family was willing to let her live with them. Maybe that's why she went to Elizabeth's in another village. But even with 20-30 miles distance, rumors and innuendos fly around in a small town. But a night vision, a visit from the angel Gabriel, changes Joseph's mind about rejecting her. He decides to finalize their union, and they are quickly married. The Bible says they were together, chastely, until the child was born.

Even in the other recording of Jesus' birth story, the book of Luke, we never hear words out of the mouth of Joseph. Joseph seems to be an observer in most of the story. While we see honorable actions, and hear him described as "just," his affect comes across as a little flat. So we picture a Nativity-scene Joseph, looking beatific with a slight gentle smile on his face, quietly raising his eyes to heaven. Nothing seems to faze him. But ignoring the emotional landscape of this man takes significant power out of the family story of Jesus. And the earliest English translations of the New Testament, second hand translations from Latin from the original Greek, take out that emotion. Verses 19-20 in the 1599

Geneva and King James Version read: “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But *as he considered this, ...*” *Enthymeomi* It’s a Greek word in this passage that has been translated very differently through the ages. “He considered or he pondered.” “He was trying to figure a way out” is how the modern paraphrase The Message words it. Even some later translations: “he was disturbed.” But how we translate ancient Koine Greek into English words is often accomplished by looking at the context of how that same word is used in other parts of the Bible. So how is this word used in other parts of the New Testament? It’s the word used to describe Herod’s rage when he discovered the magi had left Bethlehem without reporting back to him where they had found the infant. It’s used to describe the wrath of the Nazareth congregation when it rose up to stone Jesus. And it’s used to describe Peter’s indignant and angry response to the vision of unclean animals being lowered on a sheet of cloth towards him, overturning everything his world view gave him about purity, cleanliness, godly living. In those three examples, pretty strong emotion is chosen in English word choices to convey the response of the person.

So apply this translation of the word now to Joseph’s story. On hearing that his fiancée is pregnant, and knowing he’s not the child’s father, are we really expected to believe Joseph was pondering the situation? Kind of concerned about what to do next? A little “disturbed?” A consistent translation of this word to convey Joseph’s response would be: Joseph was angry. Joseph was furious. Joseph was deeply hurt and embarrassed. And when we translate the true emotion the Greek language was trying to convey, we allow ourselves to see a real human being that isn’t much different from ourselves. We can see him as an everyday “Joe”, as our neighbor, our friend, our own human response to the hurts and shames and deep disappointments of the world. We can hear his humanity in those emotions and the frantic search of his mind to find a solution different from what the law required in this situation. Because the law of the religion he was faithful to follow was very clear: Deuteronomy 22:23-24 says: “If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death ... you must purge the evil from among you.” By the written law followed at that time, Mary needed to be stoned. The penalty for the announcement of her pregnancy was a sentence of death, no further questions asked. But, God’s assurances now on his heart, as a just man Joseph follows a new justice. His actions aren’t in compliance with the old law. Being just now means he shows compassion out of love. And in

his subsequent actions, he continues to show us a glimpse of what his God had shown all through the story of God's people in the Old Testament: love wins out over law every time.

Joseph's trust in the message God sent to him did not make this choice to stay with Mary less fearful and risky. In the custom of 1st century Judea, Joseph probably would have traveled alone to Bethlehem to register his family for the census count in his historical home town, according to ancient Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey. But he doesn't do this male head of household task alone – he takes Mary with him. I had always wondered why in the world a nine-month pregnant woman would have to take a treacherous donkey ride. But there they are on the journey to Bethlehem – alone. The answer may be: Joseph still feared what could happen to Mary if he left her behind. Maybe there was no one to take care of her if he left her in Nazareth. Their shotgun wedding probably led to shunning. And – maybe there was a residual fear on his part that self-righteousness would take over the village, and they would take their own action to enact what the law required.

Jesus would not have been born if Joseph didn't set aside everything he was taught to believe, ignored the law, and suffered humiliation and social isolation to stand by Mary's side through this. She had received her call and vocation from God, and Joseph now understood this. So he followed her fate, and kept her safe from family, from neighbors, even leaving behind all he knew by immigrating to a strange land to get them out of harm's way from the king in power at the time. He was a just man not because he blindly, without heart, complied with the justice of that time. He was just because he followed God's new law, love.

God's instructions to Joseph are an embodied fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "a new thing is coming; can you perceive it?" Joseph perceived it. And so, he became the second father to this baby, named Jesus as the angel instructed. In the family story of Jesus, like all of us who are part of the family of God as Christians, we perceive two fathers. In the story of Jesus we start to learn of his heavenly father's ways by watching the emotions and subsequent actions of his adopted father. For in Joseph, we see also glimmers of our heavenly father: anger and rage at times because of His people's sins and betrayals, disillusionment with the people that should love him above all other priorities and values. There are words of God's angry response all through the Bible. But ultimately – we see glimmers of God's compassion. Forgiving. Not always following the letter of the law, but following the nudging of the heart. Like

God reaches out to us, Joseph reaches out his hand to Mary, showing they were in this together, allies in helping to make God's plan become incarnate. Following the lead of the heavenly Father of this baby, who is giving a new law to follow.

Isaiah 41:10 says: “... *do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*”

In fear, we can at times pick and choose which laws we want to follow. Unfortunately, in picking and choosing what laws we want to follow, we also can create fear in others. We're quick to cite “Thou shalt not kill,” but then we choose to kill another human by execution, when evidence shows they are innocent, just because the law says “they're out of legal appeals in the court system.” We're quick again to cite “Thou shalt not kill,” forcing a child to bear a child conceived in violence, but are unwilling to follow God's law to feed and clothe that young woman, to give the mother and child the healthcare they then need to thrive and be healthy. We're quick to cite “They're here illegally,” but choose to ignore God's law to “care for the resident alien that lives among you.” We humans love to pick and choose when we comply with the law. Jesus, when asked what the greatest of all of all God's laws was, replied there are two: “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind. And, you are to love your neighbor as yourself.” As Christians, Jesus taught us that these dictates override all other laws. So we must be on guard to our worst inclinations, to hold at bay the strange and unexpected that causes us to be anxious, uncertain, fearful, by rigidly using the law as an excuse from having to use our hearts. But this was the good news that Jesus repeated to his followers and religious leaders: “I'm here to show a new way.” The law was made to help humans flourish, so when confused or in doubt – love is the guiding rule.

Every Sunday we pray: “Our Father who art in heaven ... “ We're praying that the heavenly father's will of love is done on earth as it is in heaven. And we pray every Sunday in our Prayer of Confession that God will ignore the law, and be to each of us like Joseph was in his compassion toward Mary. Therefore, may we be a part of bringing God's kingdom to earth, and, be just like Joseph in our loving compassion to all those God brings to us in our life. Reach out in love, as God continues to reach out to us – THIS is the good news for all people.

Amen.