

Matthew 1:18-25

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

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel'*

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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We Owe A Lot To Joseph.

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Many Christians would say that's ridiculous: *God* was Jesus' real father. Joseph's a mere bystander, unimportant.

Conversely, if Joseph *was* Jesus' real father, then Jesus isn't so important, no longer the Son of God.

Either way, Joseph is far from central. At most, we'll give him credit for protecting Jesus as a little infant.

But Fred Craddock, a marvelous preacher and professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory, says Joseph raised Jesus, and that made a big difference to who Jesus was. Joseph was the man who taught Jesus and cared for him; Joseph was the one who showed Jesus how to be a carpenter, and took him to the synagogue.¹

We followers of Jesus owe a lot to Joseph.

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The Bible story from Matthew, read by Louise today, could be called "The Annunciation of Joseph." An annunciation is when an angel "announces" – "annunciates" – speaks and makes clear - something that God wants done. And in

the lesson Louise read, an angel speaks to Joseph in a dream, and says Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The son she will bear will save people.

The "annunciation" of *Mary* is famous. It's told by Luke: Angel Gabriel appears and startles young Mary, shocking her by saying that she will become pregnant and bear a child named Jesus. There are many glorious masterpieces depicting *Mary's* annunciation -- by da Vinci and Caravaggio, Donatello and Botticelli, Rubens and Rossetti and Fra Angelica. One of my favorites is most recent, by Henry Ossawa Tanner. In these works, Mary is usually bathed in light, absorbing the profound news. *Mary's* annunciation is deemed powerful, central to Christianity.

But the annunciation of Joseph, told by the other gospel writer, Matthew? That annunciation -- that powerful, profound announcement to Joseph -- fades from most memories. There are few paintings.²

Why?

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All during December, every Sunday, we've been wrestling with questions like this one. Four writers in the Bible tell the chronology of Jesus' life: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But only Matthew and Luke say anything at all about how Jesus was born, and these two tell very different stories. Today's issue -- the annunciations of Mary versus Joseph -- is only one example. There are many more we've been discussing this Advent.

Among my sources for our exploration of the Christmas texts has been this book, [The First Christmas](#), by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.³ Both are professors who dig into the Bible and grapple with all the big questions we have, too. I'll lead a book group on this in January, if you want to learn more.

When we find contradictions, like today's, what do we free-thinking Christians do: we who are not hemmed in by particular creeds we must follow, we who are encouraged to use our minds to explore Christianity fully. For us, progressive Christians, who honor the freedom of pulpit and pew to disagree, do the differences among Bible stories mean we should reject the whole Bible as unbelievable?

Professors Borg and Crossan say no. Read the stories in the Bible very carefully; pay attention to all the details; notice the differences, BUT NOT to debunk the stories as made-up and unworthy of serious attention. Rather, pay close attention to the details and differences, because these are the best clues to the deepest meaning of the stories.⁴

Because ultimately what we're trying to learn is this: what did the writers of the Bible mean -- Matthew, Luke, or any others? What meaning did the first readers take from these stories? What meaning could we take from them?

Dig in, to find out.

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Why, for example, would Matthew focus on Joseph, and tell a whole story where Joseph wrestles with what he should do, once he finds out Mary is already pregnant.⁵ This story about Joseph's quandary has caused innumerable woes for Christians; if we could avoid it, we would. Because at its core, in this story Joseph first assumes Jesus is a bastard – that another man fathered Jesus. Isn't that the logical conclusion: that Joseph finds out his wife-to-be is pregnant, not by him, and makes a decision to quietly end the engagement?

At that time, to be engaged was like being married – a formal contract had been signed, and the parties could not end an engagement without a trial. Parents often entered into contracts engaging their children far in advance, and only after the children were old enough, and the husband could sufficiently provide for the wife, did the man and woman move in together. Mary and Joseph could have been betrothed for years already, in a legally binding contact essentially akin to marriage.

So now Joseph had choices.⁶ Faced with a pregnant wife, he could call for a public trial. Or he could have asked everyone for advice – talking with family or neighbors, wondering at church about the best option, what God's will was – but of course, in a small village like Nazareth, this would not remain quiet long. Either of these options – the trial or seeking others' opinions -- would have been public, would have humiliated Mary.

Joseph also had the third option of citing the Bible – doing what the Bible says! Calling for what scripture said should be done, in this case, Deuteronomy 22 says “She is to be taken out and stoned to death in front of the people.”

On the surface, any of these options could be labeled just and fair: turning to the Bible, to trusted advisers, to the justice system.

But Joseph, the story says, was a “good man,” a “righteous man” – which means a man in right relationship with God.

And because of this – because Joseph was a good man – he didn't want to publicly humiliate Mary.

He would dismiss her quietly.

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One way to look at this story is that Matthew wants all his readers to know his own conclusion: Jesus is the New Moses, the one who can lead the Hebrew people out from their slavery, into new freedom, as Moses did.⁷

For Jews, there were three giants in their history, their George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, their national fathers. The first is Abraham, father of their nation, from whom they were all descended, who'd first followed God's call to journey to the Promised Land, Israel.

The second is Moses, who later led the people back to the promised land, after they'd been enslaved in Egypt under the evil King Pharaoh. Moses was the savior who led the Exodus out of Egypt, parted the Red Sea, received the Ten Commandments from God on two tablets, and journeyed with the people through the wilderness of the Sinai back towards Israel.

The third great forefather was King David, a mighty warrior who united the twelve tribes of Israel into one people, defeated their enemies, ushered in their golden era of power, and established Jerusalem as their capital.

For Matthew, writing centuries later, Jesus is the new Moses, and Joseph is from King David's clan. That was the meaning Matthew wanted people to know.

And to make that clear, Matthew makes sure that Jesus and Moses have similar childhoods, both involving narrow escapes from death, saved by their fathers. In the Moses story, the powerful King Pharaoh had grown nervous about his slaves, the Hebrews, because their population was growing. If the slaves got too numerous, they might try to rebel, and over-run their Egyptian masters. So Pharaoh ordered that all newborn male children be drowned.

To avoid this calamity, Hebrew parents divorced: they stayed apart, to ensure no children would be born, only to be drowned by Pharaoh. Despite this, Moses came to be born because Moses' father learned, in a dream, that the son he would have would become great, and save the people. So Moses' father did not fear re-marrying his wife, and having a child with her.

Sound familiar? Joseph had the same experience, as told in the Gospel of Matthew. He had decided to divorce his wife, Mary, but because Joseph learned in a dream that the child to be born would save the people, Moses returned to Mary, having a child with her.

That's one deeper meaning of the annunciation of Joseph. We learn, right at the beginning of Matthew's description of Jesus' life, that Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses, come to free them from what enslaves them.

Think of this birth story in Matthew as the introduction to all that Matthew will develop further, as you read on in his gospel.

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But I think there is even more we can glean. For the story of Joseph is the universal story of what happens when any of us struggle to know what is the right thing to do. Known, or unknown to us, the choices we make can have implications far beyond our own lives.

This is the message from "It's a Wonderful Life," the 1940's movie shown on every channel at every hour during this season. The actions of one person can impact many others. George's seemingly insignificant life stuck in stupid old Bedford Falls, saves the grieving town pharmacist from mistakenly poisoning a patient, saves the dignity for many struggling families who are trusted with home loans, and saves the lives of hundreds of sailors on a WWII transport.

So we do struggle, doing our best to sift and sort decisions, knowing the impact our decisions can have. As parents, when do we prod our children to do their best, and when do we unconditionally support them? As grandparents, when do we offer advice, and when do we remain mum? As employers, when do we give a second chance, and when must consequences follow missteps? As members of this church, when do we stand firm on an issue, and when do we defer to others' views?

As followers of Jesus, how do we know what is the right thing to do?

Joseph had laws to follow, laid out in the Bible: the Ten Commandments. Joseph also had stories passed on through the ages in his religious tradition of how God acted with and for the people. And Joseph knew that the letter of the law had harsh consequences: a crushing trial or a deadly stoning.

So Joseph chose another path. He would not demean Mary, set her up for rumors and ridicule, would not cause her sleepless nights and shame. He was a good man.

Where in the bible did it say this was what he should do?

Says Professor Craddock, "In the very nature and character of God"⁸ as set forth throughout the Bible: the dominant picture of God, once we hear all the stories, is a God of steadfast love and mercy, returning again and again to his people. I quote Dr. Craddock:

If in reading the Bible you find justification for abusing, humiliating, disgracing, harming, or hurting, especially when it makes you feel better about yourself, you are absolutely wrong. The Bible is to be read in the light of the character of God.....

Joseph is the first person in the New Testament who learned how to read the Bible. Like Joseph, we are to read it through the spectacles of the grace and goodness and the love of God.⁹

As Joseph wrestled with what the right thing was to do, he did not simply take the surface words of the Bible, but read deeply into it, to understand God as completely as he could.

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Friends, when you are struggling to make a difficult decision, look through the lens of love and grace, look at the issue through the vantage point of forgiveness and new beginnings. Look at it through the perspective of compassion, the true nature and character of God.

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As I look at today's text, about Joseph and how he made decisions, I don't know if Joseph really had a dream in which an angel appeared, or whether his assessment came after very careful thought, premised on what he knew of God's character, and he worked that out somehow in a dream. I don't know how exactly Joseph decided to stay with Mary and raise her child, the one named Jesus. I don't even know how Jesus was conceived: how could we ever know for sure? But what is clear is that Jesus was raised by one who understood deeply who God is, and the way God works in this world.

So Jesus, in time, could teach us all how to seek out God, seek out Truth, seek out Love, in the most profound ways. So in his Sermon on the Mount, as described later by Matthew, Jesus went beyond the narrow law of even-handed justice -- an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth -- and instead invited us to forgive over and over, as God has forgiven us. And when Jesus was confronted by an angry crowd who wanted a woman caught in adultery to be stoned, Jesus was able to suggest that the one without sin should throw the first stone. And one by one, the crowd dissipated.

Jesus, in time, as a grown man, could teach us that who we sit with or what we eat does not determine our godliness, or his, but whether we care for the lost and least with compassion. After all, that's the most important question of all the questions that arise this Christmas season: how do we care for one another?

Joseph, the Jew; teaching Jesus the Jew, about the Jewish God of unending, steadfast love.

We Christians owe Joseph a lot. Thanks be to God for Joseph, and all those who follow in his footsteps.

¹ "God is With Us," The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 65-67.

² Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth (Harper One, 2007), 100.

³ See note 2, above. I have used this book extensively in my Advent series, and I am deeply indebted to the authors for my understanding.

⁴ Borg and Crossan, pp. 23-24.

⁵ Borg and Crossan address this at pp. 101-113.

⁶ Craddock discusses these options, pp. 65-67.

⁷ This is the conclusion of Borg and Crossan

⁸ Craddock at 66.

⁹ Id.