



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

Reflections of Peace: Joseph Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 1:18-25

Tracy Jessup, Senior Minister to Gardner-Webb University, reminded me in his weekly devotion last Monday of one of my favorite stories about children and church.

A little boy came home from Sunday School and his mother asked him what he had learned. The little boy said that they learned about this man named Moses who was leading some people away from the Egyptians and the Egyptians were chasing them. As they were being chased, they came to a huge river. So Moses had his men build a bridge and then all of the people crossed over. As soon as they crossed over, Moses called in an air strike and the planes blew up the bridge so that the Egyptians could not capture them.

Completely shocked, the mother asked her son, "Are you sure that is what your teacher taught you?"

The little boy said, "No, that's not what she said, but you would never believe the story she told us!"¹

I suppose Joseph could relate to that little boy. I imagine Joseph at the local watering hole somewhere in Egypt after the family escaped Herod's murderous wrath. Another man, an Egyptian, also watering his donkey, said to Joseph, "Hi. You're not from around here are you? What brought you down to Egypt? And Joseph, looking at the man with weary eyes, shook his head, grinned a little, and said, "You would not believe me if I told you!"

Matthew did tell us, and an amazing story it is. Listen to his recounting of Joseph's part in the story of Jesus' birth:

¹Tracy Jessup, *Monday Mornings*, Gardner-Webb University, December 15, 2014.

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.

Matthew 1:18-25

Just as he was preparing to settle down, establish a livelihood, and begin a family, Joseph was confronted with a huge dilemma. He was not the first person to have to deal with a perplexing moral problem, nor would he be the last, but to Joseph, at the time, he was the only person in the world who was forced to grapple with a situation he did not ask for nor did he want. We are not told how he responded when Mary told him that she was expecting a child, but we can guess that it was not a pretty scene. Surely he felt betrayed, dishonored, and shamed. He had loved Mary for a long time. He had known her forever. She was the only girl he had ever thought about marrying and he believed she felt the same about him. Obviously not. She told him that cockamammy story about an angel announcing that the Holy Spirit would impregnate her, but who in the world would believe a story like that? He had no idea who the father was, and he did not really care at this point. He still loved Mary, he knew that. He did not want to hurt her, but he could not go through with a sham marriage simply to cover up her infidelity. He decided to call off the marriage. He would handle it quietly and then leave so that she could marry whomever it was she loved enough to have his child. As much as it hurt, Joseph was through with Mary.

Even though he thought it was the right thing to do, Joseph felt no relief as he walked away from Mary, leaving her sobbing in her mother's arms. His indignation over this betrayal was righteous, he was certain. Most men would make a public scandal of the situation and subject Mary to a grueling interrogation by the priest and possible stoning by the villagers. He should have felt justified as he walked away from the house he had visited so many

times; instead, he was sad and distraught. As night fell, he tried to sleep, reminding himself over and over that he was doing the right thing. Yet, sleep was elusive. The image of Mary's radiant face collapsing beneath his anger and pain tortured him and rest would not come.

At some point, exhaustion must have prevailed and Joseph slept, but his rest was disturbed by, of all things, that angel who was apparently making the rounds. Gabriel, he called himself, messenger of God. In his dream, the angel assured Joseph that everything Mary had told him was true. She had not been unfaithful. The child was of God. He would be the Savior of his people, living proof that God was in their midst. It would be best for Joseph to marry her.

Joseph slept. When he woke, he was refreshed and calm. There was no anxiety, though he reflected on everything that had happened. There was no fear, though the future with Mary and this baby was uncertain at best. There was no question that he and Mary and this child would become a family. Feeling confident and excited, more at peace than he had ever been in his life, Joseph hurried back to the little house and to Mary, knowing that it was the right thing to do.

Who would believe a story like this one? Would you or I believe it today? Probably not. Yet, we believe the stories told in scripture and trust that the people involved believed them. How did Joseph accept this explanation as truth and agree to become Jesus' earthly father? Obviously he had to think it through and this is the point at which the angel was of great help.

The story makes several assumptions: first, that one believes God communicates directly with us. Perhaps thousands of years ago, God used angels to deliver his messages, people at that time being more open to heavenly visitors. These days, God may use other means to communicate with us. Second, there is the assumption that Joseph understood the implications of the angel's message. The angel hailed Joseph as a "son of David." Joseph's lineage, which Matthew traces in the opening lines of his Gospel, links directly to King David and from him to Abraham. Thus, as a "son of David" himself, Joseph would secured Jesus' lineage back to King David as well. Fathers announced the names of their children in that time and Joseph was instructed to name this child Jesus which is a form of the name Joshua which means "he saves." Jesus would be the Savior of the world and needed a name that was fitting. Joseph would make that happen. Finally, the angel reminded Joseph of the Messianic prophecies which all

good Jews knew by heart. This child, known as Emmanuel, would be a witness to all people that God was in their midst.

Matthew's telling of the story does not provide much time for Joseph to take all of this information into consideration; yet, all of the people involved in the story of Jesus birth were deliberate about their part in the drama. Joseph must have struggled with his sense of betrayal, his love for Mary, and the message from God and concluded that what Mary had told him was correct. Though his decision went against popular opinion, though his choice subjected him to ridicule and speculation, though his commitment to Mary and this child would bring hardship and heartache, Joseph knew that it was the right thing to do and that decision brought him peace.

The moral issues that confront us today are monumental. How do we respond to terrorists who storm a school and massacre over a hundred children and adults? Do we act out of the ancient mantra of an eye for an eye or do we find a way to follow Jesus' admonition to love our enemies? If the latter, how in the world do we love people who have no love for others?

How do we handle persons who illegally enter our country? Are they sojourners in the land who deserve our hospitality or aliens who threaten our security and way of life? How would we want to be treated if we were in the same situation?

How do we address discrimination in our nation? What do we do with racism when it is no longer an issue between Blacks and Whites alone but now also involves brown and yellow and red skinned people? Do we support the struggle for one group to gain dignity and rights while allowing hateful attitudes to be transferred to a different group? Do we pat ourselves on the back for elevating one subgroup of our population while treating another as second class or even non-citizens? What does the angel of our God-given dreams tell us about living with one another in this world? What does God whisper to us in our sleep?

How do we make wise business decisions without hurting customers or employees or our competition? How do we handle schoolwork without cheating in one way or another? How do we respond to neighbors who may not be neighborly at all without becoming vengeful and hateful ourselves? How do we relate to the other people in our family without jealousy, anger, or resentment? How do we raise our children to be people of integrity and faith? How do we get through each day and know what is the right thing to do?

Without realizing it, these are the kinds of thoughts that ran through Joseph's mind that night he considered "dismissing Mary quietly." Though they were not yet married, in their culture, Mary and Joseph were engaged, a legal relationship that could be broken only by death or by decree. Legally, Joseph had every right to divorce Mary, but that decision did not bring him peace. Only when he thought deeply and faithfully about his options could God speak to him and offer guidance. It was only in the process of his reflections about what was happening and God's role in it all that Joseph could decide what to do and find peace.

We do live in a complex and ever-changing world. We never know what a day will bring or what we might be expected to do. Hasty decisions, however, are not the answer. Knee-jerk reactions rarely bring us good fortune. Pat answers are hardly ever good prescriptions for what ails our world. It is in thinking through our problems, considering all of our options, regarding everyone who is involved, and checking our ideas against the teachings of Christ that we gain insight from God and make our best decisions. Reflection opens our minds and our hearts. Reflection opens the door of our lives to God. Reflection help us to find our way to peace.

Biblical peace is not simply a feeling of calm and quiet. God's peace has to do with wholeness of life. When life comes together for us, when all of the pieces fit, when we are in sync with the Spirit of God, then we have peace. It would be hard to believe the story of how Joseph became the father of Jesus except that by choosing to love and support Mary all the pieces of the story fell into place. It would be a story of fiction and fancy except for the fact that Jesus lived and died and rose again to bear witness to its truth. Joseph's story would be unbelievable except that when he decided to do the right thing he discovered peace. And that peace extended to the entire world. This Christmas and in every day of life, may our reflections on the story of the Child of Christmas, our Savior, lead us to do the right thing . . . and find peace. Amen.

December 21, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Our hearts pounding with the rhythms of redemption, justice, and peace, we praise you, O God. Isaiah's vision was more than a dream. It was a visitation of your Spirit offering a glimpse of the kingdom of your love and righteousness. With the world finally turned right side up, enmities will cease, violence will fade away, want will be no more, and compassion will rule over heaven and earth. It is a day for which we long, O Lord. It is a day for which we are willing to work.

Help us to work for a day when the technology that has been poured into weapons of death and destruction will be transformed into instruments of healing and hope. May we work for a day when we do not get up looking for our enemy but rather rise to a new day of cooperation with our friends.

Help us to work for a day when our greed for what others have becomes a generous desire to share what we have with those who lack the basic needs of life. Guide us to understand that the abundance of resources on this earth was given by you as a gift to enrich all of life. Enable us to see that we are the recipients of your kindness and the chosen stewards of your world. Help us to be faithful to this calling, O Lord.

Help us to work for a day when we are willing to follow the Christ Child into places in need of redemption, healing, compassion, and peace. Grant us the wisdom to serve and the courage to serve well. Transform our celebrations of a child who brings good cheer into the worship of the Christ in our midst. Fill us with the joy of your Spirit, the love of your sacrifice, the hope of your promises, and the peace of your salvation. May we once again welcome Christ into our lives and serve him faithfully all the days of our lives. Amen.