

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 10, 2017

Christmas Is Expensive

Matthew 1:18-25

Years ago, winding my way down Billingsley Road, I spotted him in someone's front yard. There he was, made of durable plastic, wearing bright colors, glowing from the inside. I wondered to myself, How many Christmases has he spent kneeling in that grass? How many cold, foggy, rainy nights has he endured? How many times has he been coated with a thin sheet of frost or ice on a December morning? He seems so solid and silent, kneeling dutifully beside his wife Mary, the two of them gazing adoringly at their newly born son. You probably know who I'm talking about. Joseph, the one who sometimes gets taken for granted or pushed off to the side in the story of Jesus' birth.

But Matthew will have none of it. Instead of telling the nativity story from Mary's angle, as Luke does, Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective. In today's text, we get a deeper look into what it was like for Joseph to hear and process and respond to the news of Mary's pregnancy.

Whether the depiction we see is a nativity set in someone's front yard or an artistic reproduction on the inside of a holiday card, the arrival of baby Jesus is often presented as a pretty serene event. "Silent night / holy night; / All is calm, / all is bright." It takes some effort to get behind the imagery and the lyrics. So Matthew opens his Gospel by giving us the backstory, going through the whole genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. Then he says, "And this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about" (v. 18a). In other words, it's good that you want to drop by the manger to glimpse the sleeping infant and his tranquil parents, but you need to know more. Behind all this serenity lies a complicated story. And at the center of it is Joseph.

One of the first things Matthew tells us about Joseph is that he was a "righteous" man (v. 19). This means he had a reputation for uncompromising obedience to the Torah, the law of Moses. I like the way that preacher John Ortberg describes Joseph:

(He) did not eat unclean food. He didn't mix with the wrong kinds of people. He didn't keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra drachmas. He was a *tsaddiq*; that was his identity. Everybody knew this about him. Nobody invited Joseph over to have ham sandwiches with tax collectors and prostitutes. He was what people wanted to be.¹

In addition to being known in the community for his righteousness, Joseph is also known for his upcoming marriage to Mary. In that day and time, it was probably an arranged marriage. In fact, their fathers had more than likely already drawn up and signed the contract. Remember that engagement in that social context was a much more formal and binding matter, not just something you could easily break off if the relationship didn't work out. Joseph is probably in his late teens and Mary in her early teens. So they have a lot ahead of them, a lot to look forward to. They'll work, play, eat, raise their children, pay their taxes, go to the synagogue, and grow older together. At least that's the plan.

But there's another plan underway too, and that plan is already being implemented in Mary's womb. When Joseph learns of it, he doesn't know what to think. Hearing Mary tell him about how an angel visited her with news of a miracle baby leaves Joseph stunned, confused, and upset. At this point, all he knows is that his fiancé is pregnant, which logically means that she has been unfaithful to him and had sex with someone else. Recall that Joseph is knowledgeable about and obedient to the religious law. And in this case, the evidence points to adultery. That's why Joseph seriously contemplates divorce. Actually, the law even specifies the possibility of Mary being stoned to death for her behavior. So in the midst of feeling deceived and betrayed, a shocked and angry Joseph must deliberate and make a decision that will shape his future and Mary's future.

Less than one chapter into the story of Jesus, we're staring at a situation where a man holds significant power over the fate and future of a vulnerable woman. How will the man exercise his power? Though Joseph and Mary certainly navigated life in an extremely patriarchal culture, we ourselves are no strangers to the ongoing tension in relationships between men and women, especially when it comes to matters of power and sexuality. Over the past several weeks and months, we've seen the steady flow of allegations about sexual harassment in various spheres of life, including entertainment, media, and politics.

Now I'm not saying that Joseph and Mary's relationship is the kind of situation that would be the lead story on the evening news, or that what we have here is a case of sexual misbehavior. But it is a case where Joseph holds most if not all the cards, and the way he exercises his options will have a big impact on the direction of Mary's life and her place in the community. As I said, how will this man exercise his power vis-à-vis the woman? Will he pursue a path that makes Mary's life harder, or a path that promotes what's good for her going forward? After agonizing, deliberating, praying, and searching the Scriptures, and seeking the advice of others, Joseph decides that he'll sever the relationship quietly and leniently through an act of divorce. That way he can minimize Mary's suffering, and at the same time maintain his reputation as a righteous man.

But remember that there's much more going on in this story than just the status and power of a first century male named Joseph. The supreme power in this story is the power of God, who is already at work creating and forming Jesus in Mary's womb. Mary has already received and embraced this news. Now it's Joseph's turn.

God sends an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream. The first words out of the angel's mouth are, "Do not be afraid." This is a pretty typical greeting in biblical stories where an angel appears to someone. But in this case, the effect of the angel's greeting reaches even further. God's message to Joseph is essentially, "Don't hesitate to take Mary home as your wife." So the way that the angel greets Joseph shows us that there are lots of things for God to overcome in order to launch his project of salvation, including Joseph's own fear, anxiety, and apprehension. In order for God's promises to be fulfilled, and his purposes accomplished, Joseph has to set aside his reluctance and take the risk of faithful obedience. He has to step up, step out, and step forward. He has to embrace both Mary and the child she's carrying.

As soon as Joseph woke up, he grabbed his cell phone from the nightstand and sent Mary a text that read, "I know it's early, but I'm coming over. We need to talk." In less than five minutes, he was knocking on Mary's door. She let him in, then walked over to the kitchen table where they sat down. He took her by the hand, looked her in the eyes, and said, "Now I understand and believe what you were telling me about this baby, especially who he is and where he comes from. I want you as my wife and him as my son."

I would like to be able to say that after that moment, everything went smoothly. Life was happily ever after. But you and I know how life is and how can people can be. If it was hard for Mary and Joseph to believe and act upon this news from God, you can bet there were folks in the community who never really accepted their account of what happened. There were always some villagers who looked upon the couple with suspicion. Apparently, Mary and her fiancé must have lacked self-control, since they weren't able to wait until their wedding day to consummate their marriage. And particularly in the case of Joseph, maybe he wasn't as "righteous" as everyone thought, especially since he didn't hold to the letter of the law about divorcing and punishing Mary.

You can't always control what other people think of you, or what they say or do. But you can focus on what you think and say and do. And in this case, Mary and Joseph did what God wanted, and acted according to his will and purpose. Certainly not because it was the easy thing to do. On the contrary, saying yes to God's word and God's way was disruptive and demanding. Obedience to God's saving plan was hard. But it was obedience to a plan that had divine love at its center.

Author Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem titled "O Sapientia" ("O Wisdom"), in which Mary says of Joseph:

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.

This "Love" that took shape through Joseph's love includes two crucial steps. First, Joseph took Mary home as his wife. This was a legal step by which Joseph was publicly claiming Mary as his wife. Secondly, Joseph named the baby. This too was a legal action. By naming the baby, Joseph was publicly embracing and adopting this child as his son. So now, Joseph has tied his life and his future to Mary and this child, with all the risks and sacrifices that will involve.

As John Ortberg has stressed, by obediently accepting Mary as his wife and adopting Jesus as his son, Joseph "bet the farm and risked everything on what God was doing."² That's because saying yes to God's call, whatever form it takes, is always costly. Christmas is expensive. Not in the sense of the price you pay for this year's holiday presents, but rather the price you pay for embracing Jesus and being his disciple. Making room for the arrival of Jesus, and joining in the movement of God's reconciling love into the world, requires sacrifice. Remember that Joseph gave up much of his identity, and a lot of his reputation, for Jesus. No longer would Joseph be able to go about his life reassured by a sense of polite respectability. God had paid him a visit, and many things had changed.

But Joseph was still a "righteous" man. Not in the sense of holding fiercely and faultlessly to every jot and tittle of the law, but in the sense of tempering judgment with mercy, and most of all acting out of love for God and love for others. That kind of love always involves self-surrender and sacrifice. In fact, ever since Joseph woke up from his dream and did what God said to do, there have been millions of other people who have made sacrifices for the sake of this one named Jesus. They've given up comfort, convenience, status, possessions, freedoms, and in some cases their very lives for Jesus and the gospel.

So let me ask you, what will Christmas cost you this year? What are some of the things you need to give up in order to embrace Jesus and follow him? Pride and the exercise of power. Reputation, status, or human praise. Independence and self-sufficiency. Time, money, or possessions. The pursuit of security and comfort. Your entrenched, unyielding conclusions about what's right and just. Your own personal plans and agenda. This Christmas, what are some of the things you need to risk in order to be a more faithful disciple?

I'll end this sermon where I began it, on Billingsley Road. Not long after the previous trip I mentioned, I passed by again and noticed that the December winds had taken their toll on Joseph. Baby Jesus was still lying in the manger. Mary was still kneeling reverently. But Joseph had toppled onto his side. And yet, his light was still on. He was still glowing, still shining. Let's give thanks to God for Joseph, for his story, and for his example of faithful obedience. May our lives look more like the kind of righteousness we see in him. May we see more clearly the cost of Christmas, and be willing to make the sacrifice.

¹ From Ortberg's sermon, "Recognizing Divine Interruptions." PreachingToday.com. Accessed December 6, 2017 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/july/recognizingdivineinterruptions.html>>.

² Ortberg, "Recognizing Divine Interruptions."