

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Model of Righteousness

Matthew 1:18-25

Years ago, winding my way down Billingsley Road, I spotted him in someone's front yard. Molded from durable plastic, wearing bright colors, glowing from the inside. I wondered how many Christmases he had spent kneeling in that grass. How many cold, foggy, rainy Southern Maryland nights had he endured? How many times had he been coated with a thin sheet of frost or ice on a December morning? He seemed so solid and silent, yet his presence spoke volumes about the meaning of the season. I'm not talking about Santa Claus. I'm referring to Joseph, kneeling dutifully beside his wife Mary, the two of them gazing adoringly at their newly born son.

You may remember that during last Sunday's children's Christmas program, Joseph got hauled into the sanctuary lying in a wagon. Getting rolled down the aisle gave us a few extra moments to honor his place in the story of Jesus' birth. And that was a good thing, considering the fact that Joseph often occupies less of the spotlight, at least in Luke's account. But Matthew's version is different. Instead of telling the nativity story from Mary's angle, Matthew gives us a fuller sense of Joseph's perspective on these events. 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 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, God's commandments. 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 probably leaves Joseph stunned, confused, and upset. At this point, all he knows is that his fiancé is pregnant, which logically means that she has had sex with someone else before marriage. Recall that Joseph is knowledgeable about and obedient to the religious law. 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.

Note that 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. So how will this man exercise his power vis-à-vis the woman? What will it look like to "do the right thing" in this situation? Will Joseph pursue a path that makes Mary's life harder, or a path that promotes what's good for her going forward? After searching the Scriptures, seeking counsel from others, and doing a lot of praying, 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 righteousness of one human being. What's happening in Mary's womb is actually the righteousness of God taking shape. This is how God has chosen to show up in order to redeem his people and put things right in the world. Mary has already received and embraced this news. Now it's Joseph's turn.

Picture Joseph living in his parents' basement. That's where God sends an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream. The angel tells Joseph that Mary's pregnancy is of divine origin. "Don't hesitate to take Mary home as your wife" is God's message to Joseph, which means that 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. And that's exactly what he does.

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 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.

But what mattered was that 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. As author Madeleine L'Engle wrote in a poem titled "O Sapientia" ("O Wisdom"), 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," the love of God 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

This is what righteousness looked like in Joseph's life. It didn't mean completely forsaking his religious heritage or abandoning his commitment to God's law. But it did mean living out the heart of the law in light of the new thing God was doing in Jesus. For Joseph, what was contained in the Scriptures still mattered. Interpretations handed down through religious tradition still mattered. Core convictions still mattered. But what mattered most was applying those convictions in ways that conformed to the supreme demand to love, in light of God's love for us.

Joseph models for us a kind of righteousness that takes the form of responsiveness. Responsiveness to the call of God, especially when that call is disruptive and demanding. Remember that embracing Mary and Jesus was just the beginning of a journey that included further uprootedness and costly choices. In another dream, an angel orders Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. Joseph gets up and obeys. Clearly, being a righteous person involves an attentiveness to God and obedience to God that moves us beyond our seasonal priorities of coziness and comfort. If you and I are going to promote what is just and right, this will mean staying attentive to the voice of God and being sensitive to his direction, knowing that this could very well mean disruption and sacrifice for the dignity and good of others.

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.

As we continue to celebrate our Savior's birth and prepare to take the first steps into the beginning of a new year, let us offer the following prayer to God:

Life-giving God,

We thank you
that still you call women and men
to share in your saving actions.

You call us to live and serve in the way of Christ,
uncertain of the future but trusting in your faithfulness.
Sometimes your choice surprises us,
the way you seem to point daunts us,
and your faith in our possibilities awes us.

Help us to say 'Yes' when you call.
Enlarge our vision,
strengthen our resolve
and increase our sense of your all-sufficient grace,
that we might be used mightily
for your glory and for the serving of your world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.³

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

² Ortberg, "Recognizing Divine Interruptions."

³ Adapted from *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*, ed. Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth (Norwich: Canterbury, 2005) 356.