

Joseph and the Walk of Faith

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“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

Matthew 1:18-25

“Sooner or later, if we follow Christ we have to risk everything in order to gain everything. We have to gamble on the invisible and risk all that we see and taste and feel. But we know the risk is worth it, because there is nothing more insecure than this transient world. –Thomas Merton

Mary gets a lot of attention this season and well she should. She is a supreme example of one who was totally given over to the will of God in her life and this willingness made it possible for Christ to be birthed through her. But Joseph was no slouch either when it came to saying yes to the will of God. He doesn't get as much attention and yet his choices were just as brave.

This week's Advent reading focuses on Joseph and the walk of faith that the Christmas story drew him into. Being the man to walk to beside Mary—to be a safe person for her, to believe with her that what the angel had said to her would be fulfilled, and to make decisions that were consistent with that belief—was no small thing. His role in the story required strength of character and brave choices all along the way. Saying yes to the walk of faith changed his life and put him on a completely different path than he had planned. It placed him squarely in the middle of the greatest story ever told.

Character in the Midst of a Perceived Betrayal

The first line of Matthew's account of the story acknowledges a real moral dilemma that brought with it real human tension. Mary was officially betrothed to Joseph

but they had maintained a chaste relationship; however, she is found to be pregnant. This created quite a public scandal and also a very personal dilemma. Joseph knew he was not the father of the baby which meant that from a human perspective there are only two possibilities—either she had been raped or she had had sex with someone else. What is a man to think? What is a man to do?

When we are under pressure, who we really are comes out and this was certainly true for Joseph. Joseph was a righteous man and righteousness is what came out when he was caught in the vice of public scandal and his own personal pain. His response to the situation came from deep inside his own character rather than being shaped by what was happening externally. Even in the midst of what he perceived as a betrayal, his choices were driven by his great love and commitment to Mary's well-being and also by his own inner conviction about how he wanted to behave in the situation.

By law he had the right to hold a public inquiry to determine how Mary had become pregnant but that was not in him to do. What *was* in him was kindness and sensitivity to Mary's situation and a desire to be good to her and to save her from additional humiliation. From his good heart, he decided to dismiss her quietly rather than claiming his right as an injured husband.

If Joseph had made a different choice, no doubt Jesus would still have been born but it would have made for a very different story—one full of bitterness and human rancor. This choice alone—the choice to be good to Mary in the face of his own disappointment and personal pain—demonstrated an inner strength and a profound trustworthiness that confirmed that he was the one to walk beside Mary as she opened herself so completely to God. He was the one to be most intimate with the Christmas

story as it unfolded. And his response of strong love eventually fashioned a home for the child that was born and the woman who birthed him.

Waking Up to Spiritual Reality

In order to stay faithful to the walk of faith in his own situation, Joseph had to wake up to spiritual reality rather than staying mired in a more human perspective. He needed to have the willingness to change his approach to the situation based on a spiritual perspective, to see it in a whole new way based on the angel's revelation. You see, Joseph had a plan—to put Mary away quietly—and it was a good plan. It came from a good place inside him. But it was still only a human plan that came from looking at the situation solely from a human perspective.

The walk of faith required Joseph to wake up, to see his situation from a new vantage point—the vantage point of what God was doing—and to change his approach accordingly. Once we have a plan in our heads, this kind of relinquishment can be hard. For Joseph, relinquishing his own plan in favor of a plan that responded to spiritual reality required believing that something truly extraordinary was going on in the midst of this human drama. It required an inner vision that enabled him to see far beyond what his human eye could see and comprehend. It meant rising above petty human drama and believing the angel's message that he was part of a larger spiritual purpose. In spite of how painful his situation was from a human standpoint, it meant believing that “all this was taking place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

Waking up is a central metaphor for the spiritual life. It has to do with waking up from the spiritual lethargy that comes from always seeing things from a purely human

point of view. It is to wake up from the spiritual dullness that comes from being so caught up in the physical reality of things that we miss their spiritual significance. When we do wake up, as Joseph did, spiritual reality becomes more real to us than physical reality and we are willing to live our lives in response to that reality.

A Little Thing Called Obedience

When we start to wake up and see more clearly what the walk of faith requires of us we are faced with a choice, a choice that is simple but not necessarily easy. *It is the choice to get up and do what the Lord has commanded us to do. It is the choice to subordinate every other thought and desire to the revealed will of God.* Here our desire for vengeance, our desire to explain ourselves, our desire to be understood, our desire for personal comfort and security, our desire to have our lives make sense to others or to be validated by them is subordinated to the deeper desire to say yes to God and join God in what he is doing.

This kind of obedience might mean that, for a time at least, we are willing to look like a fool to everyone else. It certainly did for Joseph. One can only imagine what it must have been like to awaken from his dream and to go back and try to explain his next set of choices to his community.

When he tried to offer the angel's perspective on Mary's condition, they probably thought, "Yeah, right!"

When he tried to tell them that he was going to marry her anyway because the angel had told him that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, they probably said, "Tell us another one!"

And when he chose to marry her but not have sexual relations with her until after she gave birth (it seemed that everyone knew everyone else's business!), it might even have caused them to question his manhood. "What kind of a man does that?" they might have thought. "Such foolishness!"

The Foolishness of the World

If the Scriptures tell us anything about the will of God they tell us this: that God's wisdom is the foolishness of this world. *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.* (I Corinthians 1:25) Joseph lived this and he lived it well. The walk of faith required something of him at the level of his character and also at the level of his practical choices and he gave it everything he had.

Sometimes we harbor a subtle belief (or at least a hope!) that we can say yes to the walk of faith and it won't require much of us. That we can take the risk of following God and still have our security. That we can follow God's will and never have to appear foolish. That we can be righteous and yet take subtle vengeance on those who have betrayed us. That we can be awake to spiritual reality and still accommodate ourselves to human thinking and planning. But there is nothing in Scripture that supports this. In fact, the Scriptures clearly indicate that he who finds his life at this level will eventually lose it and he who loses his life at this level will surely find it.

Joseph's life speaks to us of this truth. Joseph's life tells us that the walk of faith will require something of us, perhaps more than we thought we were capable of. But as we say yes to the walk of faith, we too find our place in the greatest story ever told—the

story of God's purposes lived out in and through our simple existence. We, too, experience God-with-us like we never experienced him before. We, too, recognize the coming of the Divine into our hearts and call his name Jesus.

*Almighty God, who came to us long ago in the birth of Jesus Christ,
be born in us anew today by the power of your Holy Spirit.
We offer our lives as home to you and ask for grace and strength
to live as your faithful, joyful children always.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God, p. 14

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