

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Joseph’s Test”

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Isaiah 7:10-16

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

A week or so ago, I was visiting one of our members whose name will not be mentioned so I might protect the innocent from my spouse. I was asked very politely about my family, about Laura’s work, about my daughter Maren’s shows at college, and about Amelia’s progress through high school. I was then asked about our family dog Garbo. It was then I explained that we now have two dogs, Garbo and the recent added Sweetie. Needing clarification, this member asked me if both of the dogs were female. I responded yes. He then let out a large belly laugh and held up five fingers. He said, “You have five girls in your house now. You poor man! You don’t have a say in anything. They probably won’t even know that you are there.” You can see why I’m not mentioning names!

Later today we will witness the timeless Christmas story told to us by the children of our Sunday School. William Willimon writes of a Christmas pageant that occurred at his church a few years ago. One the day of the big event, the director of the pageant came running down the halls of the church, breathless from the fellowship hall where all of the young actors were gathering to put on their costumes. She was screaming, “We have no Joseph! We have no Joseph!” When she finally settled down, she explained that the child who was supposed to play

Joseph was taken by a terrible bout of nausea just before he was to leave home for the church. His mother had called to say he would not be at the pageant. There was to be no Joseph. The minister had a great solution. He said, "Let some shepherd stand sort of near the manger with Mary. Nobody will notice that Joseph is absent. He doesn't even have a speaking part." So that is what they did. And everything worked out fine.

John Buchanan tells the story of a little girl who was drawing a picture of the Nativity scene. It was designed to be a busy project, to calm her Christmas excitement, but the little girl took the project very seriously. When she finished, she showed the picture to her mother. The girl carefully explained each figure and character: the shepherds and sheep, the three wise men and their camels, the stable with the cows and even a cat and dog, and of course in the center of the picture- Mary and the baby. Her mother noticed something was missing. "Where is Joseph?" she asked. The little girl had forgotten. But instead of taking the picture and making the correction she simply replied, "Oh well, who needs Joseph anyway!"

Joseph may be the most overlooked person in the entire story of Jesus' birth. He is mentioned only in the gospel of Matthew, and in Matthew's account of the nativity, Joseph doesn't get to say a single word. The angels speak to him of God's plan as it is to happen to his betrothed wife Mary and he accepts his part silently. He is mentioned only one other time in Scripture, when Jesus is twelve and wanders off to the temple on the family Passover trip to Jerusalem. Other than that, Joseph doesn't seem to matter. His importance in Matthew's story is the linking of Jesus to the lineage of David. Joseph performs this role without a sound, just standing there in his place of the list of generations.

This whole drama probably wasn't what Joseph had planned. Most certainly he wasn't planning on participating in a world changing story. He was a carpenter and he probably planned to live life in a straight, measured, and exact fashion. He planned to marry his fiancée Mary. He probably planned to settle down with Mary and enjoy a quiet life in Nazareth. That was his plan.

And then everything changed. God stepped in. God intruded into Joseph's life and things got complicated. His fiancé got pregnant. Imagine the difficulty of that situation and that first conversation between the two. Joseph might have been angry, certainly heartbroken. But Scripture says that he was a righteous man. Instead of publicly punishing Mary, Joseph sought to quietly end the engagement.

Then there was the dream. He discovered the child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The baby it seemed already had a name- Jesus. Joseph wasn't consulted on any of this. None of this was part of his plans. While the gospel of Luke describes Mary singing with joy at the news of the child she was carrying, Joseph was apparently too stunned to speak. Quietly, his life disrupted, he faithfully carried on.

Then came the announcement from the governor. Everyone had to return to their place of family origin to pay their taxes. With little money to live on and with a baby on the way, Joseph loaded his wife upon the back of a donkey and made his way to Bethlehem, the city of his ancestors. Again he did so quietly, dutifully, faithfully. Though this was not part of his plan he responded as if he knew what he was doing was part of a more important plan.

In his *Christmas Oration*, W. H. Auden portrays Joseph in a modern day, sitting in a cocktail lounge, having a drink and thinking about his unbelievable circumstance. A chorus offstage voices his doubts:

"Joseph, you have heard
What Mary says occurred,
Yes, it may be so
Is it likely? No."

Mary may be pure,
But, Joseph, are you sure?

How is one to tell?
Suppose, for instance...Well...

Joseph wants to make this risky trust easier. He asks:

“All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof
That what my Love had done
Was really at your will
And that your will is Love.”

The angel Gabriel responds to Joseph:

“No, you must believe;
Be silent, and sit still.”

Joseph's world, his life, his plans-everything had come apart so it seemed. Nothing was going to be the same as it was. And there was nothing all too logical and orderly that he could trust as he looked into the future. Yet Joseph took his place in God's story. He believed. Quietly. Faithfully. He connected his own story and circumstance to the divine. He did what he believed to be God's intention without knowing for certain where things were headed.

In the first lesson, King Ahaz was issued the same kind of invitation of faith as Joseph. Trust. Believe. Act in obedience. Put God to the test. Ahaz declined to put God to the test because he did not want to assume the responsibility of faith. He did not want to allow himself to even investigate the notion that his actions might have a place in the divine plan and therefore have consequences in the realm of God's work among people and throughout creation.

But Joseph put God to the test. He reminds me of some of you. With little fanfare and with even less certainty you do your best to be faithful to God's intention. You understand that what you have this day may not be what you had planned or even what you dreamed, but it is what God have given to you. You may have planned for a terrific education, a meaningful job, a perfect family, enriching travel, peaceful vacations, and a glorious retirement. But sometimes health concerns or money or layoffs or stressed relationships or children or aging parents or circumstance of the world beyond our control intervene. You can't live as you planned. You must live by faith. You muddle through the ebbs and flows of your relationships knowing that in such human partnerships, you will sometimes find God. You labor diligently and loyally, sometimes without reward, simply because in such work you find meaning and purpose. You greet each day, even in the midst of the great problems of our world and even in your own fear and worry; you trust that somewhere out there God's promise is yet to be.

Perhaps you hear the angel's word just as it came to Joseph. Perhaps it comes in your dreams or perhaps it is speaking even now. “Don't be afraid. Life is not what you had planned. But God is with you right now. Anything can happen. Put God to the test.”