

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“A Deeper Righteousness”
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Advent 4—December 22, 2019

Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is put in an awkward position. We learn from Matthew that he was a righteous man, clearly respected and he planned to marry a woman who seemed like a good match. Following the custom of that day, they were engaged and they prepared for their wedding when—surprise!—Mary discovered she was pregnant. The law proscribed that she should at least be divorced, and at most she might even be killed by stoning. That was the tradition. We can imagine how Joseph and Mary might have felt: scared, embarrassed, angry, hurt, betrayed, let down, confused, sad.

W. H. Auden offers a glimpse of what the neighbors might have been saying to Joseph: *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... Maybe, maybe not. But, Joseph, you know what Your world, of course, will say About you anyway.*¹

Joseph is put in an awful place and he chooses quietly to dismiss Mary, unwilling as he is to expose her to public disgrace, although you know full well that people will find out. You can't keep something like that a secret.

Jill Duffield writes: “How often have we found ourselves like Joseph, bereft at the obliteration of what we anticipated, invested in and hoped? The college acceptance does not come. The dream job ends. The engagement is broken. The health challenges take away beloved hobbies or heretofore ordinary activities. The divorce happens. The arrest becomes public. We struggle to accept the new reality and then muster all the energy we can and attempt to manage the unwanted turn of events. We even seek to do so faithfully, carefully, with as much fairness and moral integrity as possible. While we may not be able to make the best of it, we can at least try not to make it any worse. We triage the situation as we wonder about or dread what comes next.”²

The surprise in this story, beyond the miraculous pregnancy, is Joseph's response. He's trying to follow the law as a good righteous person would and then he has a dream. The angel of the Lord appears to him and says: “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 a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

So Joseph chooses to break the strict, literal letter of the law in order to fulfil a deeper righteousness. He chooses not to divorce her, not to hand her over to be embarrassed and even put to death, instead he takes her as his wife as if nothing had happened, and in so doing, he models a new understanding of righteousness that Jesus himself will teach. Joseph is our example of how to live a compassionate life, ordered by the greatest law of love, rather than any other lesser laws. As Jill Duffield goes on to write: “Part of what makes Joseph righteous is his willingness to set aside his own upright plans and embrace the strange message from God that appears to run counter to previous divine commands. The radical part of this story that we often miss amidst pageants and poinsettias is Joseph's decision to jettison what he fervently believed was the right and faithful thing to do and instead step into the new thing God was doing. This only foreshadows what will come: Jesus will eat

¹ W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Random House, 1944

² Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*. 4th Sunday of Advent. December 22, 2019.

with sinners. He will heal on the Sabbath. Gentiles will be engrafted into the covenant. Jews and Gentiles will eat at the same table. God will continue to upend expectations and do so through unlikely people in ways the self-righteous will find offensive.”³

Joseph continues to be an example for all of us today. He encourages us to challenge any law, any tradition, in order to fulfill a deeper righteousness. All kinds of people have followed his example. I think of people who protested the injustice of Jim Crow laws by integrating lunch counters and busses and schools. What they did was illegal and some of them landed in jail, but they were following a deeper righteousness and their faithfulness led us to a far better future.

I read a story last week about a professor who was acquitted earlier this month of felony charges in federal court in Tucson, Arizona for assisting immigrants in the desert. He is still facing sentencing for a lesser charge of operating a vehicle illegally in the desert. He is part of a group called No More Deaths, which was started in part by our own Presbyterian pastor and former Moderator of the General Assembly John Fife. They have been providing water and food and other humanitarian aid for people in the desert for the last thirteen years. What is at issue for groups like this “is whether or not it is a crime to provide lifesaving assistance—water, medical treatment, food—to undocumented migrants in the desert. More than 3,000 people have died crossing the desert in the Tucson area since 2001. For many of Warren’s supporters, providing such assistance is an obligation of their faith—to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and clothe the naked.”⁴

I don’t know what all the answers are concerning immigration, but it strikes me that people like Professor Warren are showing us a deeper righteousness that might technically break our law, but absolutely are faithful to God’s higher call.

The story of Joseph is also for people like us who know what it is to face circumstances not of our own making, that shatter dreams or upend plans. Duffield writes: “I read this story and think of many I know wrestling to make sense of impossible, uncontrollable, inexplicable experiences. I read this story and remember people of faith - just, upright, fair, righteous children of God - who in the face of difficult relationships, heartbreaking news or tragic events responded with grace and mercy and love, when lesser reactions would have been seen as justified. I read this story and am reminded that God may well do something salvific through some of life's most chaotic happenings.”⁵ Our current sadness, disappoint, difficulty—these may be the place that God is creating something new. This may be our place “to take a stand and make a choice that runs counter to common wisdom or cultural norms or even religious rules, the courage to imagine that God is at work even when we are reeling from the loss of what had been our hoped for future.”⁶

The story of Joseph is a story of faithfulness. It is a story of deeper righteousness. It is a story that can show all of us how to live in times like ours.

Let us pray: Loving God, whatever our present circumstance, empower us to discover your deepest righteousness. Open our minds and our hearts that we might discover your voice proclaiming again: do not be afraid. We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gregg Brekke, Warren Acquitted of Harboring Immigrants, The Christian Century, December 18, 2019 Vol. 136 No 26. © 2019

⁵ Duffield, Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.