

The Decision

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 25, 2016
Christmas Day – Year A
Matthew 1:18-25



Angie stood up in front of the crowd of high school teens and said, “I’m pregnant.” Everyone sat up a bit straighter, some quickly turned to look at the person sitting next to them and asking, “Did she say what I think she said?” She had everyone’s attention now.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m pregnant. I’m really scared and excited. I’ve been dating this guy, and we’re engaged to be married. We didn’t really plan for this. I really love my fiancé, and I really think this baby is special. I think this baby is going to change the world.”

The truth was that Angie was not pregnant. She was delivering a monologue as part of a presentation at a youth conference. We wanted to tell the story of the birth of Jesus in a way that allowed the youth the chance not only to hear the story, but perhaps experience it as well. So Angie would relay the experience of Mary, but without saying she was playing a role.

She was convincing; maybe too convincing.

The reactions began immediately. Some people got quiet and avoided her. Some were visibly angry. Some were disappointed. A few were happy for her. One group of girls wanted to throw a baby shower there at the camp, another offered to let her take some of her prenatal vitamins. Almost to a one, everyone believed Angie was pregnant. When they went to their small groups, they discovered she was playing the role of Mary, and had a chance to come to terms with the scandal of Jesus’ birth.

If, in 1999, the responses range from horror to disappointment to anger to elation, what might it have been like in the first century?

An old Christmas carol called “The Cherry Tree Carol,” captures the scandal:

Mary spoke to Joseph

*So meek and so mild
Joseph gather me some cherries
For I am with child.*

*Then Joseph flew in anger,
In anger he flew;
Let the father of the baby
Gather cherries for you.*

Of the gospel writers, Matthew notes the scandal and doesn't try to hide it. Unlike Luke, who keeps the focus on Mary, Matthew turns his lens on one of the more underappreciated of the figures that make up the story: Joseph.

John Buchanan tells about four-year-old Megan, who, a few days before Christmas, was drawing a picture of the Nativity:

When she completed her work, she explained each character to her mother: shepherds and sheep, three Wise Men and camels, the stable with cows and a cat and a dog and the manger, and, of course, Mary and the baby. Megan's mother, Laura, noticed that someone was missing. "Where's Joseph," she asked innocently, assuming of course that Megan would remember and sketch him in. Slightly exasperated, Megan shot back defensively, "Who needs Joseph, anyway?"

But here on this Christmas morning, one of the few that falls on a Sunday, Joseph should stand at the center. As many scholars have pointed out, he is no ordinary man. He is a deeply honorable man, honorable enough to go against tradition, even against a fairly clear reading of Scripture, in order to do the right thing. Engagement was not in the first century what it is today. It was often an agreement between families, binding, like marriage. The couple could be engaged at a very young age, and then when they are old enough, they would be formally married. It was a very serious matter, and Joseph finding out Mary is pregnant forces him into a decision.

"Well," someone probably advised him as he pondered the decision, "just do what the Bible says. Take her out and stone her to death in front of the people. Says so in Deuteronomy 22."

Joseph will not do that. He finds out she is pregnant. He knows he is not the father. Matthew very simply narrates, "Unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly."

I know of very few people in 2016 who would be able to muster the compassion Joseph displays, let alone in the first century. Plenty of men would have dismissed her, but not quietly. They would have been so concerned for their own honor that they would have made sure everyone knew who was in the right and who was in the wrong. They would have invoked every law they could find from the Hebrew Scriptures to justify their rage and humiliation.

We can speculate that Joseph is at the very least, deeply hurt. And yet, in the midst of his own pain, as Craddock paraphrases, he says, “I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her.”

So Joseph is set to do the right thing. And it’s then that he has this dream...that God wants him to do something outrageous, wants him to go through with it, to do the unthinkable: as if nothing happened...to bring Mary, now big, really pregnant, into his home, as his wife.

Was I Joseph, I would have to protest. I mean, come on, I’m doing the righteous thing here, the honorable thing by her, and now you’re asking me to, what exactly, give up the last bit of honor I have in the community, the last bit of dignity I possess, to take her in?

But not Joseph. He awakens from the dream and recognizes it for what it is, the very voice of God, shining a light right into his soul and asking him to take part in the salvation God has planned for the world through Emmanuel. Joseph will have to empty himself of pride, he will have to give up whatever future he had envisioned for himself, he will sacrifice his honor for the sake of this dream, for the sake of God. He is told that this child is straight from the Holy Spirit, and he is being invited to take part in this luminous plan, to join his life, as it were, to the life of God now coming to be in Mary’s womb, Emmanuel.

W.H. Auden writes, “I know nothing, except what everyone knows – if there when Grace dances, I should dance.”

Michael Lindvall tells a story of a scandalous birth in his book. The pastor is approached by Tina Cory, a young, unwed mother and daughter of Mildred Cory, faithful church member. She wants to have her little baby, Jimmy, baptized:

The real problem was the picture of the baptism that we all had in our heads: Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long fled to North Carolina, and

Mildred Cory the only one who would stand when the question was asked, "Who stands with this child?" Traditionally, the whole extended family stood at the appointed time. It hurt to think of it, but they approved it, of course. The baptism was scheduled for the last Sunday in Advent.

The church was full, as it always is the Sunday before Christmas. The rumored snow had not yet come, though the sky was heavy with it. After the sermon, the elder who was to assist me with the baptism stood up beside me at the baptismal font and read the words I had written out on a three-by-five card: "Tina Cory presents her son for baptism." He kept looking at the card and not at Tina, who was rising to come forward, as if there were some further point he wished to make.

Down the aisle she came, nervously, briskly, smiling at me only, shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt all right, every bit as much as we all knew it would. So young this mother was, and so alone. One could not help but remember another baby boy born long ago to a young and unwed mother in difficult circumstances.

I asked, "Who stands with this child?" I nodded at Mildred slightly to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side, then returned my smile.

My eyes went back to the service book. I was just about to ask Tina the parent's question of commitment when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus McDowell had stood up, Minnie beside him. Then a couple of other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday school teacher, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy. Tina was crying, of course, and Mildred Cory was holding on to the pew in front of her as if she was standing on the deck of a ship rolling in a great wind, which, in a way, she was."

Mary seems to always be in the center of the story we tell this day, always meek and mild, always a slight smile on her face, pondering these things in her heart, often with a halo. Joseph, on the other hand, well we often may think, "Who needs Joseph anyway?" But we do need Joseph, especially this morning. Today we see him, standing there, off to the side, emptying himself, a sign of what God does on this most holy day, becoming one with us, one of us, Emmanuel.

On this Christmas, Joseph is standing up with the baby he names Jesus. Grace is dancing, and he throws caution to wind and takes her hand. So on this most holy day, let us stand, let us dance, let us live in the light of the One who is with us, Emmanuel. Amen.