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“Don’t Be Afraid To Be Different Like Joseph”

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Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The text for the sermon today is from the Gospel reading Matthew 1:18-25.

I’m sure you all remember young love, dreams, plans for a future. I remember meeting my wife and dating. That first date and getting to know each other.

As we fell in love I remember thinking about how our lives would be together....what our future would hold.

What about you? Do you remember dating your spouse? Do you remember young love? Do you remember the dreams you had and the thoughts of what life was going to be like????

No doubt, Joseph in our Gospel story thinks he knows how his life is going to be.

Joseph lived in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee. He was a carpenter by trade.

Surely it seemed to him like his life was in his own hands and it lay before him to take the tiger by the tail and be a successful craftsman, husband, and father.

You see Joseph is engaged to a young woman named Mary. I imagine that Joseph thinks he knows how his life is going to be.

Perhaps he has dreams of getting married and having many children. Maybe he dreams of teaching them how to be carpenters like dear ole Dad.

Maybe Joseph thinks that he could become the most sought after carpenter in Palestine. People may come from near and far to buy hand crafted furniture or wood workings that he has made.

It could be a family business. Perhaps the family could be wealthy and move from their mud-brick hut to a home built of cut stone with a tiled roof and interior cedar walls, like Solomon had. He could educate his children and give them everything he never had.

Perhaps Joseph has dreams of taking the family on vacations to the Sea of Galilee or even to the Mediterranean Sea, maybe the cities of Tyre or Sidon.

Yes, maybe Joseph has dreams, aspirations, the desire to be a good husband and a good father...dreams to teach his children the Word of God, good citizenry, and carpentry. That's what Dads do, right? Teach their children to fish or hunt or how to build something out of wood... to drive a nail.

But now, all those dreams, all those plans are destroyed. Joseph learns that his fiancé is pregnant. They have not known each other the way a husband and wife know each other.

Joseph knows this is not his child growing in Mary's womb. All of Joseph's dreams must have come to a screeching halt.

And immediately I think, what would you or I do in this same situation? Your fiancé is pregnant or has gotten someone else pregnant during your engagement.

I imagine that most of us would break off the relationship in a heartbeat and it would be a scorched earth kind of situation.

Everyone around us would know what happened and why the relationship was terminated. There would be anger, resentment, and a feeling of kicked in the gut betrayal.

Most of us have seen this type of betrayal play out on television or the tabloids, or maybe even some of our own lives and it is not pretty. And we see the public reactions to infidelity.

But how does Joseph react? Now Matthew tells us that Joseph is a righteous man.

That means that Joseph is a strident follower of the Jewish Torah, the Law of Moses. And under the circumstances the law tells Joseph that he has to expose Mary at her father's door or the gate of the city.

To do otherwise would put Joseph's righteousness in question. And stoning to death was the punishment. The law did not say expose her if you so desire.

But how does Joseph react? In Matthew chapter one, we get a good look at the heart of Joseph. And we see that Joseph is a good man, an upright man, a kind man.

Joseph, who wrongly assumed that Mary had been unfaithful, wished to live according to God's law. But, Matthew says he is unwilling to put Mary to shame and fully intends to divorce her, but quietly. Again, the Jewish law would have called for an unfaithful Mary to be stoned to death.

But obviously Joseph felt compassion for Mary and planned to do this as quietly as possible. And Matthew says that Joseph had resolved to divorce her. His mind was made up.

But the angel comes to Joseph and says, "Do not be afraid," and Joseph did what the angel had commanded him.

Joseph did two things. In verse 24, he took Mary home as his wife. That's a legal step. It meant he was publicly claiming her as his wife. And then verse 25 says he named the baby. This too is a legal action.

In the act of naming the child, Joseph is publicly adopting this child as his son. Joseph has now deliberately tied his destiny to the lives of two stained reputations.

Joseph has made a decision that will amaze anybody who comprehends it.

Now his days as a righteous man are over, and whatever the future has for him, it will not be polite respectability nor success.

I want to show you an example of how this affected Joseph's reputation. We see part of the price Joseph paid in Mark 6:3, when the people in Nazareth reject and say about Jesus, "Isn't this the son of Mary?"

Probably Joseph is dead by now, but even if the father died, a man in Israel was always referred to as the son of his father...Jesus bar Joseph.

To refer to the man as the son only of the mother often was a harsh expression, something like a crude English phrase where somebody calls somebody else the son of a—and then an insulting word for the mother.

Mark 6:3 may well reflect that decades later, not just years but decades later, Joseph's reputation still has not recovered from his marriage.

Since that time, millions of people have made sacrifices for the sake of this one called Jesus. Many have given up status, possessions, convenience, freedoms, even their lives.

But Joseph, who gave up his identity and reputation for Jesus, had not even seen him yet. When Joseph looked into people's eyes after he obeyed God, things were never the same. They never looked at him with the same respect and adoration.

But when he looked into the eyes of that child, Jesus, he knew he had done the right thing.

Joseph could have walked away and still been a righteous person. But God called him to a new standard of love, to a whole new way of being a good person.

A good person is no longer just someone who avoids sin and follows the rules. In Matthew chapter five Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Joseph has given us an incredible example of trust in God. Joseph has given us an incredible example of how to live beyond just following the laws and rules of our society. Joseph has given us an example of loving and living sacrificially.

Joseph chose to be different. And even though we see how he was scorned 2000 years ago, you and I look back today and see a man who trusted God, a man who sacrificed his reputation for Mary and for Jesus. And we see a kind, a good, a righteous man; a man who was afraid but through his trust in God showed us how to live differently.

So, what does all of this mean for us? Like Joseph, perhaps your life or your family is a mess. Maybe like Joseph, our plans have not all turned out the way we had hoped. Maybe some parts of your life just seem harder than they should be.

Maybe you feel that you're not one of the "decent" people here today. We all have skeletons in our closet...secret sins or scary addictions to deal with.

On the outside we look like we have our act together, but on the inside we have greed and self-indulgence and hypocrisy. We all make mistakes, we all forget things. We all have sin. We are all broken in some way. We share that.

Perhaps you even feel like God can't touch you today. But this should not...and must not...drive us to despair or shame or discouragement.

Joseph shows us how to be different. He shows us how to trust in god's promises. He shows us how to live and love beyond our conception of love.

He shows us a sacrificial love, a love that puts others first. Joseph shows us that the focus of Christmas is on the Christ child, which is exactly where it should be....but so much of the time it isn't. Why?

The commercialization of Christmas has been very successful. The getting of gifts and electronics, and toys. The me focus. The maybe giving our children too much. The hustle and bustle of getting here there and everywhere.

Getting your tree and decorations up and having more lights on your house than the neighbors. The Black Fridays, the long checkout lines, and the traffic jams. Trying to finish up at work.

Many say that this is the most stressful time of the year. This "Silent Night" time of year, this "Peace on Earth and Good Will Toward Men" time of year....stressful.

And a lot of it we bring on ourselves, and we can either keep it up or we can follow the example of Joseph and be just a little different.

So, I have a few suggestions for this Christmas Season, a way to be different like Joseph.

#1 As you decorate for Christmas give your Nativity Scene the most prominent location at home, or maybe at the office, or in your yard.

#2 Instead of purchasing expensive electronics this year, find a family outing that can be your gift. Some adventure for your family. A focus on time together.

Parenting.com suggests a Hot Air Balloon Ride, or a Train Ride, or other family friendly vacation.

#3 Help your family to focus on those in need. Samaritans Purse, a Boone, NC Ministry of Franklin Graham son of Evangelist Billy Graham has a catalog of ways to help the less fortunate.

You can donate to help birthing centers, care for orphans, provide clothing and shoes, provide food, clean water, baby chickens, wool bearing animals, dairy animals, or send a shoebox gift.

Or use one of the sponsor a child networks that takes a monthly donation which supports a child. And usually there are letters exchanged between you and the child.

Find a way of your own...small steps.... you fill in the blank of how your family is going to be a little different this Christmas and to focus on the Christ Child and the sacrificial love that Joseph has shown us.

Then, no matter how messy, busy, or stressful this Christmas Season seems, we will be a little different. We will be touched by the Christ child.

We will not be driven to despair, shame, or discouragement. We will be focused on Jesus who came into our world over 2000 years ago. We will be focused on why he came.

Jesus' name means "our God saves." He has saved us from our sins. That's why he came. He is Immanuel, "God with us" in the midst of this mess, our mess.

Now, as we begin this Advent Season and prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the birth of our Savior... may we have the courage to be different like Joseph regardless of what people around us may think.

Put Christ first this Advent Season. Because one day like Joseph we will look into the Savior's eyes and know that we have done the right thing, we have put our trust in what really matters.

And there is no greater promise than eternal life through faith in Christ...the Christ whose birth is what all the celebration is supposed to be about. Our God is with us and He rescues us and saves us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.