Adopting Jesus

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Matthew 1:22-25

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Angels fascinate people; these divine messengers from God. Their dazzling attire and serene countenance captivates us. And their wings; there is something about their wings that we find simply irresistible.

Everyone in this Christmas story is visited by an angel. Zechariah is greeted by an angel named Gabriel while performing his temple duties (Luke 1:11). Mary has a surprise encounter with the same angel who foretells that she will give birth to a Son whose kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:26). Joseph is expressly told by an angel to take Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:20).

Next Sunday, these shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night will be serenaded by a virtual choir of angels (Luke 2:13). Angels are integral to the story.

Have you ever been visited by an angel? I have; four of them, as a matter of fact. I knew you wouldn’t believe me, so I brought along a picture as proof. In a spirit of full disclosure, this picture was taken last Sunday afternoon at the rehearsal for our children’s Christmas Eve services.

Mary and baby Jesus are always front and center in the Christmas story. While they receive top billing, Joseph is always pictured off to the side in a support role. He’s the forgotten one in this story. He has no speaking part.

The gospels don’t provide much detail on Joseph’s life. We don’t know his age when he is engaged to Mary. Since marriages in those days were arranged by families when couples were typically in their teens, we presume Joseph’s age to be comparable to Mary’s.

Joseph is a carpenter by trade. Homes in those days were constructed out of mud brick and stone. It was a carpenter’s job to cut and lay beams for the roof, hang the doors and construct household furniture. They also made farm implements such as plows and yokes. Since fathers passed along their trades, we assume Jesus learned his carpentry skills from his father.

The New Testament is remarkably restrained about giving us details of Jesus’ childhood. There’s only one story that survives about Jesus’ childhood, although the so-called Apocryphal Gospels are far more expansive. One such gospel tells us about Jesus as a boy helping in his dad’s business. A rich man orders a bed
Joseph exits the gospels rather unceremoniously.

from Joseph’s carpentry shop. This father and son duo custom make all the pieces for the bed. Joseph must have forgotten to measure twice and cut once since one board ends up longer than the others. This is no problem for the wonder-working Jesus, who engages his supernatural powers to lengthen the board and save the day.

Now for the story in the gospels from Jesus’ childhood: when Jesus is 12 years old, he and his parents travel to Jerusalem to observe the Passover and return home caravan style. Joseph supposes Jesus to be with his mother while Mary imagines Jesus with his father. When they come to the horrible realization that Jesus has been left behind, they make the day’s trek back to Jerusalem, only to find Jesus enraptured in the temple listening to the rabbis. He’s oblivious to the consternation caused to his parents. When his parents express their upset, Jesus answers cryptically, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49).

This single story from Jesus’ childhood is a portent of things to come. It’s the last we hear of Joseph. Since nothing more is said about him, we presume he dies before Jesus begins his public ministry. Joseph exits the gospels rather unceremoniously.

I’m trying to imagine the conversation Mary has with Joseph to let him in on her role in human history. If you will indulge me a moment, this is what I imagine them to be saying to each other. ‘Joseph, we need to talk. I have something to tell you.’ Before Joseph can get a word in edgewise, Mary blurts out, ‘I’m pregnant.’ There’s a long pause in the conversation; truly a pregnant pause. ‘You’re pregnant,’ he repeats out loud. ‘Who?’ Mary continues, ‘An angel told me I’m going to have a baby. He said the one to be born will be called the Son of God, who will reign forever and ever.’ Joseph stares into space. He wants to believe Mary, but he can’t get his mind around what she is saying. Not that I blame him or anything!

Joseph is faced with a choice: he can either go through with the marriage or seek a divorce. If he lets it be known he is not the father and initiates divorce proceedings, Mary’s life will be put in jeopardy. The punishment for adultery in those days was severe: death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:21).

Matthew informs us, in verse 19, that “Joseph was a righteous man.” This proves important to the story. A righteous man is one who meticulously keeps the law of God. Joseph does the honorable thing. He doesn’t want to put Mary at risk, so he resolves to “divorce her quietly.” It’s the prerogative of the man in this patriarchal society to
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summon two witnesses together and simply declare in Mary’s presence, “We are divorced,” and the deed was done.

As Joseph prepares to put this plan into motion, he has a dream in which he is visited by an angel. “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. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

This is asking a lot of Joseph. He is being asked to give up his right to sire his own first born. The birth of the first born, then as now, was a really big deal, given that the first born was the principle heir and entitled to a double share of the inheritance. The fact that Joseph is willing to give up this right to father his first born says a lot about his character.

Joseph awakens from his dream and does as the angel instructs him. He takes Mary to be his wife. He thereby opens himself to ridicule and shame. This is no small matter in a shame-based culture.

When Mary gives birth to her son, Joseph bestows on him the name Jesus (Matthew 1:25). The very act of naming seals the adoption since the law places the responsibility for paternity squarely on Joseph’s shoulders. The rabbinic commentary on the Scripture called the Mishnah clearly states, “If a man says, ‘This is my son,’ he is to be believed.” Joseph has become Jesus’ legal father. The adoption is final. That’s why Scripture regards Joseph as Jesus’ real father.

When Jesus begins his public ministry 30 years later and people hear his teaching and witness his power, they review Jesus’ pedigree. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son? (Luke 4:22). They remember Jesus way back when. His parents are decent, honorable people, but nobody special. He is raised in a no-name village called Nazareth. When Nathaniel is invited to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, he asks derisively whether anything good can come out of Nazareth (John 1:46). Jesus isn’t born among priests and kings in the holy city of Jerusalem. It’s no wonder that a 2nd century Greek writer named Celsus, who was a vocal critic of Christianity, derides Christians for having a common laborer for its founder.

You might have thought the one place Jesus would have received a warm welcome would be his hometown. Yet, their familiarity with Jesus prejudices them against believing him. It’s what prompts Jesus to say to people, “Truly, I tell you no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Luke 4:24).

Aesop’s Fables date back 600 years before Christ. One of Aesop’s fables, entitled The Fox and the Lion, is accom-
When in doubt, do the right thing.


There is plenty of research to substantiate this “familiarity breeds contempt” claim. Studies have shown that the less we know about people, the more we are inclined to like them. When we come to know people well, we cease noticing their good traits and start focusing on their faults. The more we know people, the more likely we are to find fault with them.

Some of you will entertain houseguests for Christmas. You might keep in mind something Ben Franklin said about company. He said fish and houseguests have one thing in common: they both begin to stink after three days!

Why on earth did God select this obscure couple for this all-important honor of bearing the Christ-child? They both share one thing in common: they are willing to do whatever God asks of them. They are reluctant, yet willing.

Mary says famously, “Let it be to me according to your word.” We’re not told Joseph’s response. He doesn’t say much; he is male, after all. Yet his actions speak volumes. He takes Mary home to support and care for her. He is willing to risk his reputation to participate in God’s plan. He does the right thing. When in doubt, do the right thing.

Joseph’s stock and trade is making things fit together. He’s a master at squaring off the edges and following the plumb line. But, try as he might, he can’t figure this one out. Mary will give birth to a son who will save people from their sins. Go figure! Still, he trusts. He has no iron clad guarantees; no blueprints to follow. Yes, life is messy even for Joseph and Mary. Even when life doesn’t make sense, they are willing to trust God for things they don’t understand.

I’ve spent a considerable amount of time the last two days reflecting on the human capacity for evil. As we try to comprehend this unimaginable horror in Connecticut, I find myself resolving once more to live for things that matter.

It all comes down to a willingness to go God’s way. Why does God pick this ordinary couple to do something extraordinary? They are willing to surrender themselves to God’s great purposes. They are reluctant, yet willing.