

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

## *“Love”*

*Part IV of the Advent Sermon Series, “What Can’t Wait?”*

*Matthew 1:18-25*

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Joseph has always played second fiddle to Mary. Though both have featured roles at the beginning of different Gospels—Mary in Luke, and Joseph in Matthew—it is Mary who is most remembered, adored and celebrated in history.

That is how it should be, I think.

- First, it is refreshing to have a Bible story where the man stands in the shadow of the woman.
- Second, she is the first true Christian theologian in that she is the first to ponder in her heart the meaning of having Jesus in her life.
- Third, she shows trust and courage in believing and embracing the news that the one she will carry in her womb is the one who will be God’s instrument in bringing peace to the world and relief for the poor. It is why she has been so beloved through the centuries by the poor and why they so often felt they could call on her name in their prayers.

There is one more reason why Mary is more celebrated, though not as important as the ones I mentioned. Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth appeals to our sentimental side. There is a bit of *Hallmark charm* in its telling. Luke tells of cousins sharing the excitement of each other’s pregnancies, of shepherds keeping watch, of angels announcing glad tidings, of the discovery of the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger, and of Mary being amazed by it all.



Matthew's story about Joseph lacks that charm. When Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he doesn't hear it as glad tidings and certainly doesn't want to rush off to tell his neighbors about it. In fact, his first thought is divorce.

But, though charm may be missing, Joseph can teach us something about being a good person... and becoming a better person than that. So, let's for a moment let Joseph come out of Mary's shadow. Let's listen to the one passage that focuses on him and let's listen for the Word of God. I'll read F. Dale Bruner's translation.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was like this. When his mother Mary had been legally engaged to Joseph, before they came together, it was discovered that she was expecting a baby—by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a righteous man but he did not want to shame Mary. So he decided to divorce her quietly. When he had given serious thought to all these things, lo, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and this is what he said: “Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife because what has been brought to life in her happened by the Holy Spirit. She will have a baby boy, and you will give him the name “Ya-Sus” (Yahweh Saves), because he himself will save his people from their sins.” Now this all happened so that the Word spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled, which says, “Look! The virgin will be expecting a baby, and she will give birth to a son, and people will give him the name ‘Emmanu-El,’ which, when translated, means ‘God is with us!’”

And when Joseph got up from his sleep, he did what the angel of the Lord had instructed him to do, and he took Mary as his wife; and Joseph did not have personal intimacy with Mary until she had her baby boy; and Joseph gave the boy the name—“Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

I'll be blunt: Joseph almost leaves Mary, and Mary needs him to stay. Luke told us of Mary's excitement in learning that she will have a child, but it doesn't take much reading between Matthew's lines to know that there comes a time when the excitement wanes and the true challenges of bearing and raising this child weigh in. Mary can't do this alone. Mary needs Joseph to understand. Yes, he is shocked to learn that she is expecting, but she can't wait too long for him to get his head around it, to get over it, to have some time to accept it. As Rev. Link said last week in her sermon, Mary is only about 14 years old. The world is what it is, and it is not a world for a young teen to raise a child on her own.

That is about Mary's perspective though, and this story is about Joseph. From his perspective a lot IS being asked of him. Yes, the world *is* what it is, and in this world—in this first century, Middle Eastern world—there is a strong honor code and a shame culture that goes with it. The shame culture is more middle eastern than it is Jewish, but the Jews do live in the Middle East being judged by their Middle Eastern neighbors and they find it hard to live as if it doesn't matter what their non-Jewish neighbors think of them... and that ends up meaning that they find it hard to live as if it didn't matter what their Jewish neighbors think of them. According to the honor code, Joseph has valid reasons to leave Mary. He even has valid reasons to let the whole world

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Bruner, *Matthew; the Christbook*, Word.



know why—to defend his honor by shaming hers. Why should *his* reputation take a hit because of *her*?

A shame culture is about appearances, and your reputation matters more than anything. And once you are shamed for something you have done or something you have said (or something others claim you did or said), your reputation remains stained as long as your neighbors have memory. Because appearances matter so much and because you want to avoid being seen as a disgrace, the one thing you do not want to do is to admit a wrong. Shame is a powerful way a community makes people behave because they do not want to be dismissed by being disgraced.

We've seen a strong resurgence of a shame culture in our country, haven't we? It has come from both right and left extremes where people call each other out publicly so their reputations will never be the same. They want to demean the ones they would like to disempower. You shame them in order to cancel them. Social media is a hotbed of shame, and there is good evidence that is a big reason why teenage suicides have risen, and why adults find it hard to see the humanity of people with whom they have major disagreements.

Still, even though Joseph lives in the Middle East, he is Jewish. He has been informed by his Jewish faith and scriptures. That means that he also lives in *a guilt culture*.

That sounds terrible. Who wants to live with guilt?

But that's the point. You are not to live with guilt the way one lives with shame. A guilt culture actually is full of hope and promise because it holds open the possibility of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption. A guilt culture is about integrity, not reputation. It is about having a moral compass. And when one has done wrong, the way forward is not to hide it but to admit it; confess it, make amends, heal from it and grow from it... at least before God, if not always before neighbors.

Joseph tries to be accountable to both cultures. He wants to *avoid shame*, but he *will not shame* Mary. He is going to leave Mary, but he will do it quietly so as not to expose her to public disgrace. If she has done something wrong, he is going to leave it between her and God and not actively debase her in the eyes of his neighbors for the satisfaction of revenge or to protect his reputation. He doesn't want to cancel her, but he is going to end the engagement.

Matthew wants us to know that *Joseph is a good man*, but this is as far as Joseph's *willed* goodness can take him.

The world being what it is, this is as far as our goodness often takes us when we try to live our lives without harming others.

- Play a game to win and not to lose, but whether you win or lose, “be nice about it.”
- Someone says something that you think is asinine? “Be nice.”
- If you are successful in life, be nice to those who serve your meals or paint your homes.
- If you're a sale person, drive the hard bargain;
  - if you're a police officer, write the ticket or even make the arrest;
  - if you're talking to the neighbor about their dog barking at night,
  - if you're having a debate;



▪ be nice (After all, “There are ways to disagree without being disagreeable.”). Maybe the whole approach can be summed up in a stark way: “Do what you have to do, but don’t be a jerk about it.”

I’m not discounting being nice. I’m a big fan. There should be more people willfully being polite, civil and kind. It takes effort, but you can act as a decent person even when you are trying to get ahead. You may not always feel like minding your manners, but usually it’s worth the effort and makes things better. As satisfying as it might be to be intentionally hurtful toward others when you think they deserve it, communities simply do not survive when tit-for-tat gets mistaken for morality. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.”

Joseph is a good guy. He is going to do what he feels he *has to do* to protect his honor **and** hers... but he is going to leave.

But God wants more of Joseph than good behavior. In fact, God wants more goodness than Joseph can willfully give on his own. And what happens next can only be described as a conversion of Joseph’s insides; a conversion of his soul, his heart, his head. A voice from outside of Joseph is heard—a goodness beyond Joseph is given him.

The voice tells Joseph to ignore honor, to despise the shame, but to be on the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> If Joseph does what this angel instructs him to do, he might end up looking weak in front of his neighbors, but so what? What is happening is of God and it is for God’s purposes, and Joseph needs to deny himself for the sake of what God is doing in the world.

Joseph is not only to remain with Mary and raise this child, but he is also to give the child a name that lets everyone know that this child is God’s own doing.

“Name the child ‘Jesus,’ which means, ‘God’ Saves.’ And when this child is grown, Joseph, many people will give him another name, “Emmanuel,” because they will have experienced “God With Them.”

Joseph needs God’s strength to obey because this kind of selfless love takes real courage.

- It takes courage to risk one’s own reputation because human dignity is more important.
- It takes courage to give up expecting life to be fair for yourself, and then to realize that life is even more unfair for others and therefor you need to set aside your rights to help defend the rights of others.
- It takes courage to be a true follower of Jesus, which means being willing disappoint others for the sake of something more important than their approval.
- It takes courage to love in a way that leaves you vulnerable to others needs, pains and struggles.

Even though selfless love asks for so much and requires so much courage, Reinhold Niebuhr offers this about why selfless love is still a gift: Since God is love, loving selflessly is how we know God.

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<sup>2</sup> See Philippians 2:1-11



After this passage, Joseph almost disappears from Matthew's narrative. But we have done well to spend some time with Joseph before he goes. We'll admit again that this story does not have Hallmark charm. There is little here to bring a tear to our eye, or to elicit an audible "Aww" at its end.

- Unless, that is, you are struggling with shame, that you have moved to thinking that your very identity is something that is wrong and should be erased.
- Or you have a hard time seeing the difference between how others see you and God sees you, and sometimes you think that certain others' approval or disapproval is Gods.
- Or you think that anytime you see any moment of selfless love, it is a beautiful miracle that might even bring a tear to one's eye.

But whether or not a tear is ever inspired, let's do celebrate

- Joseph's God-inspired, Spirit-enabled, act of selfless love,
- his doing what his son later calls for when he says, "**Give your life to gain it,**"
- and his displaying what his son later will describe as the greatest love when he says, "**No greater love does one have than this, but to lay down one's life for another.**"

Let's celebrate this beautiful moment of utter selflessness for the sake of

- Mary,
- and the child,
- *and*, most importantly, the world.

