



THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHRISTMAS FOR JOSEPH

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Matthew 1:18-25

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Last week we read Luke 1, where the focus around Jesus' birth rests on Mary. This Sunday, we turn to the other Gospel that tells of the birth of Jesus, the Gospel according to Matthew. In Matthew 1, the story is told with the focus on Joseph. So today we consider the implications of Christmas for him.

New Testament scholar Eugene Boring states that Matthew does not invest big theological claims in the virgin birth. In fact, Boring says that Matthew 1:18-25 could drop out altogether and it would not affect the Gospel's plot or essential message since neither the virgin birth nor the infancy narrative ever gets mentioned again. Maybe he is on to something because, after all, it is not Matthew's version of Jesus' birth that we know by heart, it is Luke's. Luke's Christmas story is artfully told. It's the one we want to hear on Christmas Eve by candlelight.

But Matthew? Well, honestly, it's kind of clunky. Listen again: "Now the birth of the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they had lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." In two straightforward, even blunt sentences, Matthew just puts it all out there...and then he gets all caught up with Joseph of all people.

As a female preacher, I do want to point something out:

Luke? Luke is all about Mary. But in Matthew, Mary languishes alone on the birthing table—managing the labor pains all by herself while the obstetrician and nurses, even the angel sent from God, are hovering over Joseph, making sure he is doing okay, not experiencing too much pain, practicing steady breathing techniques to help him cope with the exhaustion he must be feeling. Yes, by all



means, let's start the story of Jesus' birth focusing on poor Joseph because God knows fathers do not get enough attention when it comes to childbirth!

The commentaries on my shelves bolster this support for Joseph, making him the star of Matthew's Nativity play. As far back as the 4th century, John Chrysostom praised Joseph as a man of exceptional self-restraint "since he must have been free of that most tyrannical passion, jealousy," not wanting to cause Mary distress and resolving to dismiss her discreetly. Chrysostom even says Joseph chose to act in a manner Jesus himself would later choose toward known sinners!ⁱ

My friend and New Testament scholar, Stan Saunders, notes how Matthew carefully develops Joseph's image, focusing on his righteousness, obedience, and chastity. Eugene Boring agrees, lifting up verse 25. He notes that Joseph does even *more* than the angel commanded—remaining chaste toward Mary until after the child is born.ⁱⁱ Oh, Joseph was a *very* righteous man! Tom Long declares that Joseph stands at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel as "the prototype for true righteousness and faithful discipleship;" Joseph is, in fact, Tom says, a "model for Christian life."

And my dear friend Ted Wardlaw once preached a sermon entitled, "In Defense of Joseph." Ted decries how we have ignored poor Joseph: "Look in a hymnal and try to find one hymn in which Joseph plays anything more than a bit part." Oh, you'll find plenty featuring Mary... "Everywhere you look, it's Mary this and Mary that!" Ted exclaims. "What is Joseph—a potted plant? It's not fair!"ⁱⁱⁱ

But one scholarly article on Matthew's birth story was written by a woman—New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa. And she offers a counter-testimony to all this high-fiving of Joseph. She says that Matthew's infancy narrative is about fear.^{iv} Fear is mentioned explicitly in regard to Herod, who is threatened by news that a new king has been born. Herod's fear will send him into a murderous rage. But, Gaventa says, fear actually enters the story before Herod...even before Jesus is born. Fear enters first by way of Joseph. And Joseph's fear surprises us because he is a 'righteous' man—striving to live his life according to Torah...earnestly



seeking to know and do God's will in all things. By all accounts, Joseph is indeed pious, compassionate—even generous. After all, he could have exposed his pregnant bride-to-be publicly, brought formal charges that could result in the death penalty. But Joseph does not do that...no, he will file for a quick divorce...dismiss Mary quietly.

Then Gaventa turns the story and looks at that from an angle other than Joseph's...she looks at it from the perspective of Mary and her unborn child. Joseph's 'generous' remedy would have devastating consequences for Mary and her baby. It would leave her giving birth without a husband in a society where women depended almost entirely on being part of a man's house for social standing and economic survival. And her baby would have no father in a culture where the father's name gave you your identity.

When Matthew says that Joseph "planned to dismiss her quietly," she notes that the same adverb is used in Matthew 2:7 to describe Herod's action when he "secretly" calls the wise men in an effort to find and destroy the infant Jesus. In English, the similarity between 'quietly' and 'secretly' is obscured...but Gaventa says that in this one respect, "both Joseph and Herod wish to shield their actions from public view."

Joseph is afraid. This unexpected and unwanted baby threatens his own standing in the community, threatens his own vision of the future he had planned...so he plans to protect himself and to do so with a plan that is actually 'righteous' according to the Law and generous in the eyes of his neighbors.

So you see, from the beginning, Matthew puts us on notice that the birth of this Messiah will threaten our settled ways, our notions of decency and order and right and wrong, even our understanding of righteousness and what constitutes generosity. And it will reach beyond Joseph into the halls of power. The birth of this Messiah will also threaten the power bases of the world, like Herod's—because they, too are based in fear, not the strength and confidence they pretend. This king and the kingdom he is bringing casts out fear. It is and will always be



based in love, operate out of meekness, humility, and grace, display power that is made perfect in weakness.

Joseph and Herod are the first in this Gospel to encounter the tension of living between the opposing visions of these two kingdoms. Both men will respond to the fear that grips them, but in starkly different ways. And from this point on, all followers of Jesus are called upon to make hard choices about which kingdom will claim our loyalty and govern our actions and define our generosity.

We recently marked the seventh year since the shootings in the elementary school in Sandy Hook. I can still remember, just a few nights after that devastating incidence of violence, that one of the fathers, Emilie's Dad, Robbie Parker, was among the first to step into the darkness and TV cameras to speak. He expressed condolences for all the families, and included the family of the shooter. He remarked that we all have "free agency" in this world—and that the young man had chosen to use his in a destructive way. Then this grieving father said we should choose another way—that he would choose another way. That he was choosing the way of compassion and humbleness and love. Every time an incident like that occurs, and it still does too often, gun sales soar because people are afraid. But in a small Connecticut town, parent after parent, people of faith, came forward to declare that they would not be filled with hate, but would choose instead to love...a generosity beyond measure.

I think Eugene Boring got it wrong. I think it would matter very much if the infancy narrative and even the virgin birth dropped out of the story Matthew tells. So much that happens afterward depends on how people respond to the way this Gospel begins.

When a Duke University student asked Will Willimon, then chaplain of Duke University, if she had to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a Christian, Willimon replied, "No, you don't." But, he went on, "if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there's no telling what [we] can get you to believe. Come back next week and we'll try to persuade you that the meek will inherit the



earth, that it is better to give than to receive, that your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions, that it's not nations or empires but God who rules the world. We start you off with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”^v

The implications of Christmas for Joseph were that his settled life was going to be changed, not just Mary's life. That his notions of righteousness were not, after all, righteousness according to God's definition. That generosity according to the Law was not generosity according to the Spirit God demands. And that everything in his belief system was being stretched beyond his imagination. What God was about to do in and for the world in this baby completely reshaped centuries of expectation.

And, God bless him, Joseph gets it in time, so let's give him some credit. And thank goodness Matthew tells the Christmas story with a focus on Joseph, who is measured, not poetic. Not many of us are poets either. Thank goodness Matthew tells the Christmas story through Joseph, who tries to solve a problem faithfully enough, like we do, but eventually let's God stretch him beyond his comfort zone not only in beliefs but in acts of generosity. Thank goodness Matthew tells the story of Christmas through the lens of Joseph who is deep down afraid, but moves forward anyway though he still isn't sure how all of this going to turn out, this cautious carpenter who lives by the rule “Measure twice, cut once.”

Gabriel did a lot of flying around before Christmas telling everybody, Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph: “Do not be afraid.” It is one of God's best and most consistent lines. In Matthew, that phrase, “Do not be afraid,” bookends the Gospel. It is uttered first here in Matthew 1:20 and again in the last chapter at Matthew 28:5 by the tomb. I suspect we need both Christmas stories—the poetry of Luke's by which we light candles and sing softly; and the clunky, slow-footed version Matthew tells, by which our fear takes a hesitant backseat so that we dare to believe more than we think is possible, give more of ourselves than seems prudent or required, and move forward in faith, carrying the Word with great care into a world that so desperately needs it.



Amen.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas, **Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 35.

ⁱⁱ M. Eugene Boring, **New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VIII Matthew** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 135.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Preaching the Advent Texts," *Journal for Preachers, Advent 2007*, 3-10.

^{iv} Beverly R. Gaventa, "The Challenge of Christmas: Two Views—He Comes as One Unknown," *The Christian Century*, December 15, 1993, 1270-1280.

^v William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, December 21, 2003, 51.