



God in the Ordinary

TEXT
Matthew 1:18–25

December 20, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In one of my former congregations, we had a tradition for the Christmas Eve family service. We would tell the Christmas story and invite the children to come up and play the part they wished. It was a smaller congregation, with only a fraction of the children we will have in here Thursday evening, so we could include everyone.

I told them about the angel appearing to Mary. “Who wants to be an angel?” I’d ask. Three or four little ones would come up, fixed in halos.

Then I asked if anyone wanted to be Mary. There were seven or eight Marys, all clad in blue shawls. There were plenty of shepherds in bathrobes and wise men wearing Burger King crowns. We had no trouble filling the chancel with children playing every part of the story — with one exception. Most years I had difficulty getting someone to be Joseph.

I would tell them how the angel appeared to Joseph. Who wants to be Joseph? Not a one.

One year I was pleading, and one of the young girls playing Mary said, “Let’s just move on. Who needs Joseph anyway?”

On one hand, she has a point. Who needs Joseph?

Mary is the chosen one. Joseph seems to just tag along, like the luggage. Joseph drops from the pages of scripture before Jesus is baptized, no longer part of the story. Maybe we should just move on; who needs Joseph anyway? Study religious art and Joseph is often painted a bit removed, sometimes disinterested, while the world stands in the glow of Mary and her baby.

Maybe we should just move on.

But Matthew seems to think we can’t get through this story without Joseph. After all, Joseph is a son of David, which is pretty important. But more importantly, Joseph is a righteous man. Mary is chosen. But if I understand the text, Joseph is chosen also.

If I understand the text, the angel comes to Joseph because God has to choose a man to help raise his son. Joseph is a good choice.

We are told that Joseph was a good man, a righteous man. He was the kind of man you could trust. He stood tall when things fell apart, which is exactly what happens. Mary mentions something about an

angel and a baby; and whatever future Joseph had imagined for himself, well, that future was turned upside down now.

We sing of “little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,” and we sing “all is calm, all is bright” because we have had 2000 years to turn this story into a moment of family warmth — but this was an intrusion that turned everything upside down.

Mary was with child, and it wasn’t Joseph’s child. Yet if I understand the text, God desperately wants Joseph to take this child as his own. No doubt Joseph was afraid.

Joseph was in a bind. His engagement to Mary was ending. Who knows how they found one another. Most likely, their parents arranged all of this. Maybe they chose each other. Maybe they hoped that by sharing life’s journey together, they would learn to choose each other. Who knows what ties people to one another, particularly back in those days. But they both knew they would marry soon. Joseph would work as a carpenter. They would raise their children together. That was their life.

But then God intrudes and tosses everything into the air.

Mary is pregnant. What is Joseph supposed to do?

To understand the full impact of this moment, we need to remember that Torah has rules about this. It states clearly in Deuteronomy that a woman who has a child that is not her husband's is to be divorced; but not only that, she is to be taken to the edge of the village and stoned to death. (They didn't worry about the man, just punish the woman. At least we have made some progress regarding that degree of patriarchy).

It's what righteousness requires.

Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man, but he can't do what Torah requires. He just can't.

Joseph decides to keep everything quiet. He knows the righteousness the law requires, but the right thing that is expected isn't right enough. He chooses a new kind of righteousness. He chooses grace.

His choice is risky — because grace is always risky. Grace is not deserved, and when we get more than we deserve, it is always risky.

Study religious art, and Joseph is sometimes portrayed as an old man betrothed to a younger Mary. Some suggest that is why he drops from the story after this moment. I don't know about that, but I know that Joseph reads the Bible like he has some years behind him. Joseph learns something that too many religious folks never figure out. He learns that the only way to read the Bible is

through a lens of grace. That's where the light shines.

So Joseph, no doubt hurt and no doubt afraid, stands tall. He chooses grace and decides to put her away quietly — to spare Mary's life.

That's when the angel shows up. If you ask me, the angel could have shown up a little bit before now, but we can't control angel timing. The angel tells Joseph that God is at work in this messy story — that this child will be born of woman as is every child, but born of God's spirit as is no other child.

This child is God's son, but God desperately wants Joseph to be this child's daddy. Just as God chose Mary to be this child's mother, God chooses Joseph to raise his son: to teach him carpentry; to take him to synagogue; to teach him how to read scripture; and to teach Jesus how to stand tall when the world falls apart. Jesus is going to need to know how to do that. I can't help but think that when the world was falling apart for Jesus, it helped him to have had a daddy who knew how to choose grace.

I'm glad the early church didn't allow us to skip by Joseph. I think this story reminds us that the world needs ordinary folks to stand tall when things fall apart and to remember that grace is always a holy choice.

I know some folks who are good at that.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was like Joseph. He chose to stand with his people during the Sec-

ond World War. He was in the agonizing position of praying that his own nation would lose a war. They killed him for that.

Oscar Romero was like Joseph. He stood tall with the poor of Latin America when their own nation and plenty of others deemed them collateral damage to economic profits. They shot Romero for that.

Pope Francis seems to be a bit like Joseph, doesn't he — caring for those who the world has passed by, casting security aside and going where the violence is real, to urge peace and compassion? I hope he lives a good long time.

I know some others who would never make the news, but they stand tall and choose grace when things fall apart.

But I'm more like the theologian Hans Kung, who once wrote, "I write Christian theology, not because I am a particularly good Christian, but because I think being a Christian is a particularly good thing."

That makes sense to me. Because I think being a Christian is a particularly good thing, I want to be more like Joseph.

I read about a kid named Ben Comen. He ran cross-country at Hannah High School, near Anderson, South Carolina. Not only did he never win a race; he never beat anyone across the finish line. But the word is that people from across the upstate of South Carolina would knock off work early to go watch Ben Comen run.

Now why would you drop everything to go watch a kid

run who you know is never going to win?

Ben has cerebral palsy. CP has not restricted his intellect, but it seizes the muscles and contorts his body, leaving him to lunge and falter, tripping over bottle caps and twigs. Ben Comen runs the 3.1-mile run; it takes Ben well over an hour. In almost every race, he falls. When he falls, he falls hard because his body can't react quickly enough to catch himself.

It is not unusual for Ben to cross the finish line bloodied about the elbows and knees. By the time he finishes, every other runner has had time to shower and get a cheeseburger. But they don't go anywhere. They wait. Not only his teammates, but kids from the other team wait. And kids from the school who aren't on any team, they wait. And when he nears the finish line, they all return to the track and together cross the finish line. Grown men from town watch, twisting their jaws, trying to keep the tears in their eyes and off their faces.

Why do you suppose the whole town turns out to watch a kid run who will never win?

I think they watch Ben Comen because they are so much like him — or more likely, they want to be like him.

They watch as people who know we aren't always very good at the things that matter most. In the journey to be righteous, we can sometimes feel more than a little spastic and clumsy. So they watch a guy who reminds them that you

don't have to be particularly good at it to do a particularly good thing. Just stay in the race.

I sometimes wonder if that old angel is still hanging around. I wonder if God is still looking for a people to whom he can give his son, whose birth we celebrate in a few days. I'm sure God would want them to be righteous people, people who know how to choose grace.

I don't know how good at that you think you are, but stay in the race. No matter how clumsy you feel, stay in the race. I'm sure the angels are watching, and it makes them grateful.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.