

**SERMON: Sunday, December 6, 2020 – Advent II. Matthew 1: 18-25**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Watch at <https://youtu.be/Eo1ARzyw7i0>

As much as the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is held in high esteem, the Bible tells us little about Joseph. I know way more about the Patriarch Joseph, the one of the technicolour dreamcoat, than I do about this first male influence in the life of Jesus.

On this Sunday of Peace, however, I wish to focus on one thing about Joseph: he was the one who could have made life extremely difficult and dangerous for Mary, and he chose not to.

Before going much deeper into the story, a bit of theological self-disclosure is in order. My take on the birth narratives about Jesus, is that they were written long after the fact, or adapted from stories and legends about this birth, by authors who had been deeply impacted by the transformative power of the risen Christ. Each of gospel writers invites their readers to open their lives to be similarly shaped by that holy, ever-present love. So whether the details of the birth narrative align even slightly with what an eye-witness would have seen, is of less importance – to the gospel writers, and to me - than what is revealed here about life and love and the presence of God in the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Countless generations have wanted to know more about Joseph, and what went into his decision in the face of a pregnancy that he knew he wasn't responsible for. I want to know what this tells us about him, and about life, and about God, And because the Bible says little about Joseph, traditions sprung up, three of which I'm going to share now.

One tradition, is that Mary and Joseph had known each other for a long time, both growing up at Nazareth in Galilee. Imagine the level of shame and betrayal that *this* Joseph would have experienced, at hearing that his betrothed was with child. They would have been the talk of the town, with all the intersections between families in a small town like Nazareth, and any plans that they or their families had mapped out would have come crashing down just like that. That Joseph, I imagine, would have been deeply hurt and very, very tempted to punish Mary for what would have felt like a shared future, shattered.

Another tradition, is that Joseph was from Bethlehem. Not just that his *family* was from Bethlehem, as per Luke's account of a census that inexplicable made people go back to their ancestral home town, but that Bethlehem was his home.

If this is true, picture Joseph not so much as a tradesman with a nicely-established business in his hometown of Nazareth, but as a working man from down south, seeking to ply his trade up north in Galilee... following the work as still happens if you work in construction or resource extraction. While most Bible translations refer to Joseph as a "carpenter," the Greek word so translated, *Tekton*, was broader than that: a builder, an architect, a stone-mason, a tradesman... and it just so happened that up in Galilee, the Romans had some huge construction projects needing lots of workers, both skilled and unskilled. Is it hard to imagine Joseph heading up there to get work, and finding himself drawn to this small-town girl named Mary? Not to my mind it isn't. And if *this* version of

Joseph were to hear that Mary was expecting, well, what would his response be? Could be that he knew other couples in the same situation and he'd just roll with it... or it could be that since he was basically unknown up there, it would be a lot easier to just divorce her and leave town.

A third portrait of Joseph imagines him as much older than Mary. Much, much, much older. In this tradition, we envision an arranged marriage, the local matchmakers finding a solid, thoughtful, respectable man for young Mary. Within this tradition, Joseph is most likely a widower – which smooths out the talk in all the gospels of Jesus having siblings, for those also wanting to assert the perpetual virginity of Mary – and it also explains the presence of Mary only at the foot of the cross rather than Mary and Joseph, Joseph having died long since.

And how would *this* Joseph have taken the news, that his young betrothed one was with child? This older Joseph, methinks, may have had the savvy to give it a few days – to listen to what that God-inspired dream was telling him about his young bride – to step back from revenge. This older Joseph may be less concerned about what other people would think, though not looking forward to telling his previous family about it.

As I hear these possible “back-stories” about Joseph, I find myself drawn to doing two things.

First, I want to express gratitude to Joseph for his compassion, and for his openness to listen to what God was telling him to do, rather than listening to the cultural pressures that would be pressing him to divorce Mary or even call for the full violent weight of the law to be brought upon her by stoning. Apparently stoning, while still allowed by the law was extremely rare, but it was still his call to make... *and he chose something else*. Guided by a dream, a holy visitor, or just his conscience, Joseph was inspired by God to choose a different response.

But after that gratitude for Joseph, the second thing I want to do, is acknowledge with dismay how often stories just like this still happen in our world. Mary then, just like millions of women now, has little or no agency: the thing that is going to happen next in her life is decided by someone else, a man following the rules of patriarchy. Without downplaying the gracious and courageous course of action taken by Joseph, *he had the benefit of privilege that Mary did not have*.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Peace, we do well to spend some time, sitting uncomfortably with this. We cannot say that peace truly exists, in a world where cultural and religious traditions regularly “put women in their place” and keep them there by lack of opportunity, lack of education, lack of options, lack of say over reproductive rights. We cannot say that peace truly exists, when half of the population has to play by a separate, more challenging set of rules, with most of the rule-makers and rule-enforcers coming from the winning team. Nearly everywhere we look, men continue to hold huge advantage... with the disappearance of so many Indigenous Women still regarded as a minor issue, in comparison with other things that get more attention...with the glass ceiling remaining a very real thing for career-oriented women, and equal pay for equal work existing in only a few professions... with women much more likely to have their workplace sexualized. And often I have been reminded of how many extra things women need to do when out at night – double-checking how they're

dressed, parking the car in a well-lit location, making sure that they aren't being followed and that nobody is hiding in the back seat of the car, holding their keys strategically in case they are needed as a weapon – everyday safety practices that should not need to be. And lest we be tempted to hold our heads too high in the Church, there are still many denominations that either do not allow women to be ordained as pastors/priests/ministers or if they do allow female ordination, do not allow them to be the senior pastor of their Church... and even in the United Church of Canada, the last time I checked (which was about 5 years ago, admittedly), 24 of the 25 largest United Churches had men as their senior Minister. As we embark on the very necessary task of working to become a denomination that is actively working against racism, we still have a lot of work to do on sexism.

I hear the story of Joseph as both a stark reminder of how often a woman has little control over her body, her life, her future, and as a ray of hope for the number of Josephs who do understand that the life-giving power of God does not endorse this. A Bible Commentator I encountered this week, Jonathan Merritt, reminded me of the number of times that our faith history, in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Gospels, engages this top-down view of society and rejects it. Yes, there is tons of patriarchy to be found in our sacred texts but time and time again, the power dynamics of the land are turned upside down: Jacob's son Joseph, the 11<sup>th</sup> of 12 boys in his family, is despised by his brothers yet rises to save the nation; David is chosen ahead of his older siblings to be King; the parables of Jesus talk about outsiders and the underclass having the final say in things; and young Mary from Nazareth, is the one among all the possibilities in the world, who is chosen to nurse and teach and love Jesus. The ways of the eldest male having all the advantages are frequently subverted in Bible texts, as our faith history points us toward a peace based on something other than codified advantage, challenging the societal structures that make some lives more valuable than others.

Whether it's Joseph the childhood sweetheart, or Joseph the megaproject worker from out of town, or wise old established Joseph who is faced with the decision, I honour and celebrate his choice while rejecting that Mary's future should be solely in his hands. I choose to work for a world where Mary has complete self-determination, where the choices regarding her life, her future, her safety, are hers to make and hers alone. And I call us, whenever we seek peace, to make sure that it is a peace founded in equality. May this be so. Amen.

References:

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