

The Journey to Bethlehem
Part 2: Joseph of Bethlehem (Mercy)

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Transcription
Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24
Poetry: "Self Portrait" by David Whyte

I. Our Conception

Last week I made an invitation to those of you who feel a bit uncomfortable with the historicity of the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke to consider these stories as being part of the deep mythological imagination of Scripture. By "mythological imagination," I don't mean they made it all up. Rather the intent of Scripture – whether it is conveying information that is historically factual or metaphorically poetic – is not so much to tell us about what happened thousands of years ago, but to tell us what happens over and over again on up until our day.

Now, last week I made the rather bold assertion that, because of Scripture's timeless mythological imagination, you should be able to pick up your newspaper and read the news and then pick up the Christmas story with the expectation that the story may provide a helpful way of interpreting the news of the day. Yet I didn't realize how much news would come out last week! As one news commentator noted this last week at least five or six stories broke that, had it been a "normal" year, just one of them would have consumed weeks of nonstop 24-hour commentary. I mean, remember how much commentary the potential shut-down of the government for failure to raise the debt ceiling would have had just a couple of short years ago? Yet this was just one of many issues making the news – from our president declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel to Russia being banned from the Olympics to the inappropriate sexual behavior of some of our elected officials, et cetera, et cetera. Lots and lots of news.

Don't you just kind of feel like shutting everything out sometimes? I mean, it's coming at us so fast, and so hard, and there's so much commentary to consider, offered by so many pundits. Don't you just want to turn off the CNN, NBC, MSNBC, Fox News, whatever it is and just breathe easy for a bit? Now how is the Christmas story supposed to interpret all this news?

Well, if you happen to be one of those people who just kind of wants to take a breather from it all, you're in luck with Matthew's version of the Christmas story. It has a lot to say about the news, only in ways that are different than what you may expect.

Matthew's version of the Christmas story is a little different than Luke's in that it starts with a story about Joseph. We don't really know much about Joseph from the Bible. Precious little is said of him. The apostle Paul makes no mention of Joseph, even though he is aware of Mary. The Gospel of Mark makes no reference to Joseph at all. There's only one reference to him in the Gospel of John. Really, pretty much all we really know about Joseph is contained in Matthew's and Luke's versions of the Christmas story. And we know nothing about Joseph at all beyond the time when Jesus was 12 years old and Mary and Joseph went looking for him only to find him in the Jerusalem Temple. Beyond that, there's nothing about him, nothing whatsoever.

Adding to Joseph's obscurity, we do not have a single word that is said to have been uttered by Joseph in the entire New Testament. He never utters a word! This has led many people to posit that Joseph may have died at some time during Jesus' life. This supposition is confirmed by the fact that, for instance, when we hear of Mary coming to meet with Jesus at one point, she comes with his brothers and sisters, but no mention of father. And, when Jesus dies on the cross, Jesus asks one of his disciples to take care of his mother, which would have been a little odd had there been a father around. So probably Joseph died sometime during Jesus' lifetime.

Consequently, Joseph is revered in the tradition as a patron saint not only of workers (because he was known as a carpenter), but also as the patron saint of good deaths. Good deaths because Mary and Jesus were both in the world when he died and, probably, at his side. If you die with Jesus and Mary beside you, that's a good death, right?

Joseph's likely death has also led some people to assume that Joseph was actually very old when he married Mary. That seems a little weird, especially in light of news today concerning a certain political figure from Alabama, but actually, there's more to the story here. In Christian iconography of Joseph, primarily in the Catholic tradition, it is not uncommon to see Joseph depicted as an old man. Maybe you've seen nativity scenes with an old Joseph. This is because, according to Catholic doctrine, Mary was not simply a virgin when Jesus was born, but remained a virgin perpetually throughout her life. Yet if Mary was only ever a virgin, it becomes a little difficult to explain why Mary shows up at one point in the gospels with Jesus' *sisters and brothers* in tow. Well, you can explain it if Joseph was a widower and had children of a different marriage and then came to

take care of Mary as an old man, never consummating their marriage. This seems like a bit of a stretch to me, but it works for some people.

One thing we do know about Joseph is that he was a carpenter, though only from a single reference in Matthew's gospel. Actually, the Greek word used here is *teknon*, which can mean somebody who works with wood, but it can also mean somebody who works with metal or stone. In Jesus' day, someone who did such things was looked at by society as the ancient equivalent of a janitor. Woodworking was not a big deal in Israel because most houses were made of stone, but they did need farm implements and things like this, which were made by a *teknon*.

So now I've just said, basically, everything we know about Joseph from the gospels other than the "small" detail that he was in the family line of King David. Curiously though, Matthew and Luke trace Joseph's lineage to David by different means, through different sons of David. Even though you can't reconcile one gospel's family tree with the other, what both writers were trying to say by showing that Jesus was of the lineage of King David was that Jesus was God's authentic Messiah who had legitimate claim to the kingship of Israel.

I find it interesting that Joseph is this major figure in the New Testament even though he says nothing and does almost nothing. Matthew even uses the story of Joseph to give us the very first shot across the bow regarding who this person Jesus is or will be – what his significance in history would be. Jesus' identity is revealed through Joseph without Joseph saying a single word. In fact, he's not even awake! It's the angel who comes to Joseph in a dream who says that Mary "will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." Isn't it fascinating that this enormous revelation comes through Joseph without him doing or saying anything? In fact, we're going to find that, through Joseph, not only Jesus' identity as savior is revealed, but Joseph even models at least three aspects of what salvation means or looks like, all without speaking a word. I love this!

The mere fact that Joseph doesn't speak reveals the first thing about what salvation means: **Salvation is silencing the voices around us, even our own voice, to hear the voice of God.** Sometimes you've got to turn off CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and all the rest, to discover that silence speaks far more powerfully than words.

II. Joseph's Conception

Some of the news that broke this week had to do with political figures who have apparently engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior either resigning from office or

running for one. I've got the feeling this won't be the end of news stories we hear about this kind of thing for a good long time ... Interestingly enough, our own gospel story starts with a sex scandal of sorts, at least in Joseph's mind. In Matthew's gospel, Joseph is not privy to hearing what the angel said to Mary about how she will become pregnant. What Matthew's gospel says is that when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he decided to quietly break off the engagement. In other words, Mary has made her explanation about becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit and Joseph doesn't believe her. Would you??

Now, because Joseph is so silent in the story, we tend to gloss over what happened and move on. But think about it. Put yourself in Joseph's sandals. The love of his life, the one who he had pinned his future hopes and dreams on, who had his heart totally, has become pregnant, and the one thing he knows for sure is that he's had nothing to do with it. Imagine the betrayal he would have felt. We know Mary's innocent, but he didn't. Some of the people in our congregation already know what this sense of betrayal feels like. I know what it's like myself – but not in my marriage. In high school, the day before the big dance, I caught my girlfriend kissing another guy. That really hurt! I can't even imagine what it must have been like for Joseph. The sense of betrayal, the hurt, the honest rage he would have justifiably felt ...

In Joseph's day, he could have taken direct, legal recourse to vent his rage – recourse written in his own scriptures. In the book of Deuteronomy, it says exactly what you do with a woman who has become pregnant by another man before marriage: "She shall be brought to the door of her father's house, and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you." (Deut 22:21)

This is the legal recourse that would have been available to Joseph. Given how hurt and angry Joseph must have felt, and the fact his own scriptures dictate what is to be done in a situation like this, it says a lot about Joseph's spiritual constitution that he didn't decide to bring the whole situation with Mary to a stone cold end.

Matthew apparently finds it very important to tell the story the way he does, showing that Joseph intended to quietly back out of the relationship rather than subject Mary to being stoned to death. It shows that Joseph chooses, of his own volition, without any coaxing from angels or the like, to act with extraordinary compassion even though Joseph thinks Mary has betrayed him. In other words, Joseph does exactly what we would expect Jesus to do, who taught us to "do unto others what you would have done unto yourself," that is, Joseph unto Mary what he would want to have done unto himself had the tables been turned.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the word we translate as “compassion” actually is “wombs” (plural), which is the Hebrew way of saying “womb-ish.” To have compassion on someone is to be womb-ish, which means to treat someone as if they are so viscerally attached to you they're part of your own body, like your own child – so you do unto them what you would want done to the most precious part of you. This is exactly the behavior that Joseph models. In so doing, he reveals another angle about what salvation actually is all about in Jesus' way of doing things. **Salvation is recognizing that being compassionate is more important than being right** (or assuming you're right).

One wonders if perhaps this value is one that Joseph taught Jesus as his father. Regardless of where it came from, the apostle Paul sums up what he believes Jesus was all about when it comes to salvation when he says, “[In Christ] God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, that is, the letter [of God's Law], but of the Spirit, *for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*” (2 Corinthians 3:6) In other words, in Joseph's own actions and in those of Jesus, they show complete agreement in that salvation has something to do with recognizing that being compassionate is more important than being right. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, he reveals one additional piece of the equation: that the same principle holds true for God, not just us. It's actually more important *for God* to be compassionate towards us than to be right. One must wonder, therefore: if even God thinks it more important to be compassionate towards others than to be right, why would we act towards others any differently?

III. Re-Conception

With all that's going on in our world today, all the trouble and conflict, it feels like we're pulled in every conceivable direction. “Join this cause!” “Sign this petition!” “Get involved in this project!” “Tell us your position on this subject!” It feels like we're living in a giant game of Whack-A-Mole sometimes. Whack this issue over here, now run over there and whack that one, and on, and on. I don't know about you, but I find this kind of game extremely taxing. How am I to know what to do or think about every problem that presents itself in our world today, and where do I find time or energy to act on what I know or think?

The poet David Whyte offers a refreshing reminder when we feel pulled in many directions at once. In his poem, “Self Portrait,” David confesses, “It doesn't interest me if there is one god or many gods.” Now, he's using this question as a placeholder for any kind of big-deal question that is not yours to answer; for any big deal subject or cause that is not yours to take on. Essentially, David is saying, “One God or many is a really big

question, but it's not *my* question." Then, he sets down on paper what his big-deal questions actually are. He lists four: First: "I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned, if you know despair or can see it in others." If you know anything about David Whyte and his poetry and his retreats, you know that this is a very, very important subject. It's a core question for David.

David's second question is this: "I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you, if you can look back with firm eyes saying, 'This is where I stand.'"

Third: "I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward the center of your longing." In other words, can you lean into your own longing in a way that molds your life, that directs your actions?

Finally, Whyte says: "I want to know if you are willing to live day by day with the consequence of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat." In other words, we're all going to die. Can you deal with it?

Curiously, by rejecting one question that is important to others and coming up with his own, Whyte circles back and discovers, through identifying his important questions, an answer to the very question that he, himself, had discarded. He concludes his poem writing, "I have heard in *that* fierce embrace even the gods speak of God."

I see David Whyte's intuition modeled in Joseph's actions in the story this morning. Joseph lived in a world full of conflict. A lot of people thought it was so conflictual that the end of the world was coming. Other people were saying it's not the end of the world but the beginning of a new one and that the violence and the chaos is just a sign of the birth pangs. In this situation, there were many, many things he could have done to either prepare for the end or the beginning – many projects or causes he could have taken on.

Amazingly enough, Joseph finds himself intimately involved in one of the most pivotal moments in world history. When we set up nativity sets 2,000 years later, Joseph is one of the six human figures we put there, right? It's Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and the three Magi. He is one of the six, and yet he said nothing. He said nothing, and did practically nothing, but he's one of the six! Why? Because Joseph did the *one* thing that was asked of him. He did what the angel asked him to do in his dream: "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife." That's it. It wasn't, "Go solve world poverty." It wasn't "Go take on the Romans," or what have you. All he was asked to do was to let go of his fear and take Mary as his wife.

It was *a dream*, for heaven's sake! God's message wasn't plastered on a billboard. The heavens did not part. The booming voice of God did not come down. So Joseph couldn't really know for certain that God was behind the message. Yet Joseph did feel the message was from God, and he leaned into his conclusion, trusting it enough to act on it. Joseph did one teeny, tiny thing with extraordinary faithfulness. In so doing, he allowed God's dream to come to fruition on Earth.

In this small but significant act of faithfulness, Joseph reveals a third aspect of salvation: **Salvation is refusing to answer any other call but the one God has placed in your heart.**

What call has God placed in your heart that you can do with extraordinary faithfulness? If you haven't found it yet, Joseph reveals the way to find it: by **silencing the voices around you, even your own voice, to hear the voice of God.** If you think you've heard from God and are not quite sure, Joseph also shows you how to test the call. You can ask if the call conforms with the recognition that **being compassionate is more important than being right.**