Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We're still in the season of Advent, but today we get a birth story! And let me tell you, every time I read Matthew's birth story, I get really grateful for the Gospel of Luke. Because if this is Jesus' birth story, where are the shepherds in the field? Where are the angels that appear to them saying, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people!" Where are the animals in the stable and baby Jesus in the manger? Our nativity sets and our Christmas carols would certainly be less exciting if this were the only story of Jesus' birth.

So I'll be honest, I've often been tempted to skip over Matthew's birth story for the more interesting version in Luke. I've often thought "Jesus and Mary are the stars of the show, why do I want to read a birth story that's so focused on Joseph?" I've often read this birth story without really recognizing how powerful it is, without noticing how radical the actions it calls us toward are.

But thank goodness I had to preach on it, because now I have an entirely new appreciation for this text, an entirely new appreciation for what Joseph did in this Gospel and what his example means for us today.

You see, our own modern day understanding of engagement can lead us to downplay just how radical Joseph's actions here were. We hear that when Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. And upon first reading, we might think "oh they could have just broken off their engagement, not a huge deal!"

But in Mary and Joseph's time, an engagement was a legal marriage contract, often arranged by one's parents, that could only be broken by divorce. An engagement would have had very real social and financial implications for their entire families, and Mary having what everyone would have assumed was an affair would have brought social disgrace upon not just Joseph but his whole family. So imagine what it must have been like for Joseph, to find out that Mary was pregnant. Under Deuteronomic Law, an engaged woman found to be pregnant outside of marriage was allowed to be stoned to death! Given his social context, it would have been understandable for Joseph to feel angry and humiliated. Under the norms of the day, he would have been "right" to punish her or publicly embarrass her.

Instead, we read that he was righteous and planned to divorce her privately, so as to not expose her to public disgrace. Again, in the face of someone who he assumed had wronged him, who he believed had disgraced him and his family, this is an incredible act of mercy. But of course, he still planned to divorce her—I mean mercy has its limits right? According to the customs of the day, divorce would have felt like the only option.

So when the Angel appeared to Joseph and told him to take Mary as his wife, Joseph got a choice: He could do the easy thing, the thing that everyone would have expected, the thing that would have even been considered "right." He could have ignored the angel, and divorced Mary anyway, and no one would have really blamed him for it.

Or he could do the thing that went against everything he'd been taught his entire life, the thing that went against the social norms his entire world was

based on. He could do the thing that risked shame and public disgrace. He could embrace what God was calling him to, and choose to wed Mary anyway.

Today we say thanks be to God that when Joseph found himself at this inflection point, when he was caught between what was “right” and what was righteous, he took the brave step toward righteousness. Joseph is not the center of Jesus’ birth story, and yet his role is absolutely pivotal to the realization of the miracle of Christ’s birth, the miracle of Jesus as Messiah, the miracle of God coming into this world to be with us. It is his choice to trust God, to decenter himself, to choose righteousness before God over being right before the world that makes space for God’s promise to be fulfilled.
You see, the Jewish people had long expected that the Savior they were waiting for would come from the genealogical line of David. We heard a few weeks ago this great prophecy of peace from Isaiah which foretold of a Messiah emerging “from the stump of Jesse,” David’s father. Jesus being part of David’s family tree was so crucial to people’s conception of him as Messiah that Matthew opens his entire gospel with a genealogy tracing Jesus back to David and Abraham, to bolster his legitimacy as the Messiah and place him within God’s promises to Israel.

But it is only through this act of naming Jesus that Jesus is adopted as Joseph’s son. It is only through this act of naming Jesus that Jesus is granted Davidic lineage. It is only through Joseph’s obedient action to God’s will, an action that went against everything the world told him was right, that made it possible for people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, that made it possible for Jesus to live into his calling.

What we see in Joseph's story is what we see time and time again throughout scripture and in our world: God's work unfolds through relationships. It is rarely isolated, or self-contained. Joseph's willingness to step aside from what the world expected into what God was calling is what made it possible for Mary and Jesus to fulfill their purpose. His story demonstrates how we are constantly being drawn into one another's callings, constantly being pushed past what is "right" or socially acceptable into a righteousness that reshapes not only our own lives, but the lives of everyone around us. His story invites us to turn inward, to think about how God has done the same thing in our lives.

So church, I ask that question to you – who have been the Joseph's in your life? Who are the people who have shown you kindness, even when they didn't need to? Who are the people who have ignored societal convention, ignored what was "right" or proper to instead show you mercy and compassion and justice? Who are the people who have risked something for you, and in doing so made it possible for you to follow God's call?

The first person who comes to mind for me was a girl I met when I was in my first week of college at St. Olaf in Minnesota, a whole 500 miles away from home. One thing about my first few months of college is that they were rough. I didn't know a single person and I was incredibly homesick and by the end of the first week I was so sure I had made the wrong decision that I had already started looking into the process for how to transfer to a school closer to home.

And so I still vividly remember that at the end of my first week, as I was heading into my first English class, I suddenly felt so overwhelmed by how alone and far from home I was that I completely broke down in a public bathroom. And it was one of those cries where once you start, you can't stop and if anyone even looks at you, you start crying harder (my criers know!). So there I am, sobbing in the bathroom, mortified as people are hurrying in and out, on their way to class. And I didn't blame anyone for not stopping. We have been socialized to mind our own business when we see someone in need, to assume that help is coming from somewhere else, to keep moving so we're not late or so things don't get awkward or so we don't get entangled into a situation we aren't expecting. In our society, it's considered "right" to continue onto the next thing. It often feels risky to step outside of what's expected, to pause, to get involved, especially with a stranger.

But then this girl walked in, an absolute stranger who was also clearly in a hurry and on her way to class. And she took one look at me, and sat down beside me on the dirty bathroom floor and she held my hand. She told me I wasn't alone and that she understood how I felt and that it would get better. And she stayed there with me until I stopped crying. She didn't owe me anything, and in fact did the exact opposite of what society had taught her to do. But because she chose what was righteous over what was right in that moment, I had a memory to return to in my mind every single time I felt homesick. It was that memory that gave me the strength to stay the course throughout that whole first year, that memory that kept me going until my college started to feel like home. I would be an entirely different person today if I hadn't stayed at St. Olaf. I likely wouldn't be here today, preaching to you all. And so as I think about our Gospel story today, I think about her. How

her obedience to compassion, her willingness to step aside from what was right or proper made it possible for me to stay, to grow, and eventually to live into the life I believe God was calling me toward. And her being my Joseph in that moment is what made it possible for me, a few years later when I saw another girl in the hallway sobbing a couple weeks into school, to be that Joseph to someone else.

In just a few days, we will celebrate Christmas. We are told in our Gospel today that the promise of Christmas is the promise of a savior, a baby named Emmanuel, which means God is with us. We are promised that God is with us and will be with us in every inhale and exhale, in our waking and in our sleeping, in every joy and in every sorrow. And one of the most incredible ways that God is with us, that God shares this presence with us, is through the Joseph's in our life, is in the way that God is constantly bringing us into relationship with one another, constantly enfolding us into one another's callings. When that stranger held my hand as I sobbed on the bathroom floor, it was God's presence that I felt. And the greatest news of all is that because we know God is with us always, because we know that nothing can or will ever separate us from God's love, we get the incredible, lifegiving opportunity to participate in God's work by being the Joseph for others.

So yes, Joseph's story invites us to turn inward, to give thanks to God for all the Joseph's in our lives. But it also invites us to turn outward to consider how we are called to be Joseph's for one another, how we are called to choose what is righteous before God over what is right before the earth. How we are called to choose and act with compassion and mercy and justice, even when the world says it's utterly wrong. Sometimes the risk we are asked

to take is life-altering, as it was for Joseph. And sometimes it lasts only a few moments, like a stranger who chooses to stop, to stay, and to show up. But either way, our Gospel today invites us into that risk, to step beyond what is comfortable or expected and to trust that God is at work, inviting us into one another's callings, amplifying them beyond anything we could ever imagine.

So church, as we enter into our Christmas season with all the excitement of the shepherds and the angels and the animals in the stable, I invite you to continue coming back to this birth story, and to continue asking yourself – who can I be a Joseph for today?

Amen.