

December 8, 2019

“The Trouble With Christmas: Troubled Father”

Matthew 1:18-25

Part of why we tell and retell the Christmas story every Advent is because we are a forgetful people. We need to be reminded again and again about God’s ridiculous and risky love – expressed through the giving of His only Son to a broken world. We need to rehearse just how far God was willing to go in order to win us back into His holy, gracious, forever family. It’s easy to forget that we are so deeply loved by God; it’s easy to get out of the rhythm of His grace!

At Christmas, we don’t need to add moral imperatives to our already ‘too-long’ list of things to do. Sermons that beg us to slow down; spend less and give more; bring peace on earth; practice self-control while at the Chili Cook Off tonight; spend more time praying. Sermons that tell us to be more like the shepherds and worship with abandon or the wisemen and bring our gifts to Jesus. I’ve preached on every single one of those topics . . . several times. And I’m not sure they were all that helpful.

The older I get the more it is dawning on me that what’s really keeping me/us from changing is my/our inability and/or unwillingness to focus on and grasp the Good News – that God comes to us in Jesus. We don’t, first, go to Him. And this love is actually quite troubling, because – if it’s true – then there are only two appropriate responses: one is to reject His love and the other is to receive the love He offers, believe that when God says we’re lovable it’s true, and **then obediently do whatever He asks of us out of love for Him**. The very nature of the Gospel means it isn’t an option to pray, sing, give, light candles, listen to God’s Word read and preached – and then go back to ‘life-as-usual’. **The story of Christmas does not allow us to merely talk about the beautiful music and good/bad sermon over lunch, and then live unchanged lives.**

If it’s really true that God loves us enough to send His one and only Son, then we will have to respond one way or the other. We’ll either have to reject that love OR receive and respond to it. Maybe what troubles us most about the Good News is that – deep down – we know this is the kind of news we can’t be indifferent to. It’s the kind of love that leads to a “yes, I want it and will live in response to it” or “no thank you, I’m not interested.” Joseph is a great reminder of this.

We actually don't have a single recorded word from Joseph, anywhere in the Bible. [Even Zechariah – unable to speak for Elizabeth's entire pregnancy – gets to speak up after his son, John the Baptist, is born.] That means we have to pay attention to what Joseph does (not says).

And what we clearly see – in this one and only passage that focuses solely on him – is that Joseph is not indifferent to anything that comes his way. He responds to each piece of news/reality as he is confronted by it.

This isn't in our passage today, but we know from the cultural practices of the day that when Mary says 'Yes' to Joseph's 'Will you marry me?' he starts building and adding on to the existing family home to make more space for the two of them. He gets to work.

After Mary is visited by her own messenger-angel from God and leaves immediately to her relative Elizabeth's house, Joseph (I imagine) does what any other guy would do: he wonders and worries – and probably stewes a bit because he's not getting the full story.

And when he finds out Mary is pregnant – probably after she gets back from her three-month visit with Elizabeth and Zechariah – he is troubled and makes a clear decision: he must end their relationship. Matthew tells us Joseph is a “just/righteous” man (Peterson says “chagrined and noble” in The Message translation). He has both a high view of scripture and a lot of compassion for others. Another way to put it is that he is full of grace and truth. He has to divorce Mary because he's committed to follow God's laws, but how he plans to go about it reflects the gracious heart of God. He is actually living like Jesus – full of grace and truth – before Jesus arrives. He only has the Old Testament, but comes off looking very New Testament'ish, don't you think?

Joseph responds to each moment and movement he encounters along the way. He's not passive with Mary. He loves her, but he also loves God's Word. He knows what he must do but goes to sleep that night troubled and wondering just how to be obedient to the law AND gracious to Mary. He may or may not have figured out what that looked like before he fell asleep, but while he's asleep his dilemma is resolved. It turns out God isn't passive either – or indifferent to his situation.

Joseph finds out in a dream that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit; that the baby will be Immanuel (“God With Us” in Hebrew). And he learns that he should call the baby Jesus – which means, “God saves, rescues, delivers.” And Joseph immediately acts on what he is being led by God to do. He doesn't mope around or write out a pros and cons chart. Matthew tell us “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” (Matthew 1:24)

[Here I read from Walter Wangerin's *The Book of God*, p.437-438. Wangerin uses a biblical imagination to 'fill in' possible details for many of the most well-known stories in the Bible. In this portion he imagines what happened after Joseph woke up from his dream. He runs to Mary's family home, where he overhears her father scolding her for bringing shame on the family, pounds on the door, makes it clear to Mary's father that he will still marry her, and then embraces Mary – letting her know he still loves her and knows, now, that God is behind all this.]

I'm not always so quick to obey, are you? I might have taken a week to think about it or have a sit down with Mary and go over the details one more time. How does Joseph respond so quickly?

One thing to remember is that Messiah was "Long-Expected" (opening hymn for traditional services). Joseph knew the promises of God in scripture, and fully trusted that God would come through at some point. "Expectant Longing" was built into the DNA of God's people by the time Joseph gets news of Mary's pregnancy from the angel. So maybe the longing and expectation in him made him more ready to respond to God's command; more believing that it had been an angel indeed and not just wishful thinking. Joseph's "Expectant Longing" allowed him to be less troubled.

What are we longing for? Looking forward to? Yearning for? And what is it that shapes our longings? Advertisers love to deepen desires for products we never knew we needed. Our culture gives suggestions for what we should 'look forward to and plan for next': college, marriage, a job, a better job, kids, a home/bigger home, retirement, financial security, and the promise of an 'easier life.' Sometimes, it's just plain envy that deepens what we long for; our friends have a lifestyle and supposed joy and we want what they have.

And how do our longings – the intensity of them and the object of them – impact how responsive or indifferent we are to Gospel (Good News) messages from God? Do the things we long for and believe most deeply (about God or us and others) actually keep us from living into the Good News of Immanuel – God living smack-dab-in-the-middle of us?

I think the hardest thing for Joseph to get his head around isn't that his beloved Mary conceived a child by the Holy Spirit; although I don't think it was easy for him to wake up and immediately take her as his wife. I think the harder thing for Joseph to grasp was this risky love of God – that He would become one of us in order to rescue us. There was no precedent for such a thing. God was present to the High Priest in the Holy of Holies, but not in the flesh – let alone in the womb of a teenager! That seems so unsafe.

What if Joseph didn't take Mary as his wife? [Dream and all, I presume he still had a choice.] Could Messiah be raised by a single parent? And even if there's a mom and a surrogate dad in place, what if there are complications with the pregnancy? Becoming Immanuel, God with us – not just in spirit but 'in the flesh' – is so unprecedented. Why not just give them some more prophets? Or deliver them from the Romans? Or clarify the law through updated teaching?

And here's what else is risky: making salvation a gift bestowed and not an award earned. Joseph did know about God's holiness and the need to obey Him, as well as the grace of God and His desire to forgive. But forgiveness came through the offering of a sacrifice that Joseph and others brought to God. What he couldn't have known – and probably never lived to see – was that God was bringing the sacrifice to us, and that the sacrifice of His Son was our means of being delivered from our sin.

Frankly, this is what troubles so many: the fact that WE can't earn salvation . . . that God does what we cannot. This is also so unprecedented. We're pretty comfortable earning our keep, working hard to get a better grade or better pay or a better life. We respond readily to a reward and punishment system. Guilt motivates – at least for a while. The strong survive. Self-made people are what made America what it is. Many of us, as we get older, recoil from a hand out or freebie. Isn't it interesting that kids have no problem opening and enjoying gifts? No kids at Christmas asks his or her parents for a receipt so they can reimburse them for the expense.

The Good News comes first: before the obedience of Joseph or anyone else; before we get it right and get noticed by God. “But God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:8)

And yet, it's precisely when we realize this Good News – this risky and ridiculous, troubling love of God – that we want to 'wake up from our dreams' and gladly obey – “do what [the Lord] commands.” Joseph is troubled and then overjoyed by this incredible, out-of-this-world love of God. And that changes everything!

May everything in us be changed by our ever-increasing experience of this troubling love.