

Isaiah 7:10-16,

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

We know about Mary and her consent to give birth to the Christ. AND, last week we all helped our wonderful choir sing Mary's Magnificat, THANK YOU FOR THAT OPPORTUNITY, MONICA. We ALL got to exclaim Mary's active consent to bear the saviour of the world, Emmanuel, Jesus.

Today, we explore the contribution of Joseph to the miracle of Christ in our world, although there is no song, or fanfare or even many words.

The Gospels don't record anything that Joseph said, but we know he must have said at least one word. Joseph would have said his legal son's name out loud to ensure his position as Jesus' legal father; the name that was given to both Mary and Joseph in their 'angel interactions' ...Joseph said, "JESUS".

We don't hear about Joseph much, and after he searches for Jesus in Jerusalem around his twelfth birthday, he seems to be gone.

But, today we explore the absolute necessity of Joseph in the birth of Christ into the world, and in our hearts for the salvation of humankind. Today, we explore Joseph as a model for us to be obedient to God, to trust in God, and commit to and protect that to which God is committed, even though it may appear dangerous, and frightening... or maybe we can make it easy to ignore because it's "confusing" and "unpromising" or worst of all, "too small to matter."

When you and I can see things that are wrong in our world ... big things, little things, easy to fix things and insurmountable things, and we feel helpless, what does scripture tell us to do? Do we divorce ourselves from the problems OR, do as scripture shows us in Joseph, an ordinary person who, in obeying, trusting, committing, and protecting did his part to change the world.

In his story, Joseph demonstrates three essential characteristics that help to change the world.

First of all, Joseph responds with Godly character and trusts

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.

Joseph discovered before they came together that Mary was pregnant while they were in their betrothal time... a time of about a year before the marriage where the couple was 'as if married' but without the physical contact that could happen after the wedding. By the way, Joseph would likely have been the LAST to hear this news. The very nosy and close-knit female community of the collective culture of the time would have had the news long before Joseph. So, it was 'common knowledge' that his wife had been unfaithful and he's trying to find the best way out of this situation.

Upon receiving the news of Mary's pregnancy, the options open to Joseph were not all that great. He knew the child wasn't his, and in his culture, he couldn't raise another man's child ... that would have been considered theft. He couldn't charge Mary with adultery because the penalty for that was horrendous in this time. When you have time, Read Numbers 5:11-31 for what was prescribed for an adulterous woman with child. His other choice, he could have been sent back to her father to be killed. There was a lot at stake around the birth of a child; lineage and property inheritance, and what was, at that time, considered God's Will.

There's a quote, attributed to master story-teller, Robert McKee who understands that "A person's true character is revealed in the choices they make under pressure .. the greater the pressure the greater the revelation." Whatever is inside of us when we are squeezed when we're under pressure is exactly what is going to come out. I think it's fair to say Joseph was under intense pressure and was being squeezed by this news of Mary's pregnancy that upended his carefully laid out and community sanctioned, plans. His plan was most likely to be married and build a nice quiet life with his wife in Nazareth, building things, going to synagogue, nice and predictable. Not this time, Joseph.

So, what came out of Joseph, under this pressure? In his compassion, he decided to quietly divorce her. We are not told what would have become of Mary had this happened, but to Joseph it was better than the other options that were available to him. What came out when Joseph was 'squeezed'? His mercy came out, showing Mary righteousness.

And then, Joseph, in a dream, receives an instruction ... a pretty far-fetched instruction, by the way, and certainly opposing the norm for his time and culture,

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their error."

From Psalm 112: 6-8

Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever. They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

The phrase "fear not" appears 365 times in scripture. Evidently, fear is a frequent response our world. AND, at least once to Mary and to Joseph. Do not be afraid "that one trusts in the Lord". That dream with a message from the angel, was the Lord's voice, in which Joseph trusted".

We are given the opportunity to recognize, and to put aside our fear, and trust when we are made aware of the 'right thing to do' in a nudge, or an inkling, or a feeling, or a dream. Fear not and trust in the LORD.

Secondly, Joseph responds with confidence in God's promise and trusts

The angel in his dream said, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

The long awaited Messiah was being born into Joseph's life and he was being told to take care of Emmanuel and his Mother, Mary.

God had never broken a promise and never will.

When I was growing up, my mother had this very frustrating habit. She would never make a promise. We'd be, "Can we go for ice-cream on Sunday?" "WE'LL SEE" was the frustrating response. "Promise?? Please promise!" Mom would always respond, "I won't promise because maybe something will get in the way and I don't want to break a promise."

God, also has this conviction about breaking promises, so our mother raised us to know what a promise meant and how perhaps they could get broken, but God makes promises and we can trust in God's promise.

"The young woman shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Can you imagine how Joseph felt waking from that dream? A seven hundred year old promise was right there and right then in Joseph's small life. That's a promise and Joseph trusted God's promise.

We need to put aside our doubts, doubts in our leaders, doubts in our heroes, doubts in ourselves and trust God's promise of salvation.

Thirdly, Joseph was courageous in following God's instruction and protects

Joseph didn't give the Angel any conditions, or back talk, or even ask a question or two. For a whole lot of years after this shameful situation, Joseph and Mary would have been seen as shamed people. BUT, Joseph embraced the shame and the fear, to accept God's will in their lives. The shame of their situation all alone would have been horrible to bear in this close-knit community, their reputations ruined in a time when one's reputation was of primary importance. Even after they had gone to Egypt and come back three or four years later, the shame would still be on them. But Joseph, trusting God's promise and trusting God's instruction, continued to respond in a Godly character of compassion, protecting his family, his family given by God.

The Hebrew translation for the name Joseph is "whom Jehovah will add to; Jehovah shall increase; he shall increase progressively, from perfection unto perfection." Yosef occurs about 213 times in the Hebrew Bible and literally expresses the idea of increase or addition, an idea repeatedly reflected in the divine fruitfulness granted to the man, Joseph, and to the tribes that sprang from him.

The truth of this for us today? We are offered the opportunity to behave like Joseph in order that we grow and are increased from what we thought was perfect to what is THE NEW perfect, in the Kingdom of God PERFECT. Dare to be a Joseph!

For Joseph to embrace this calling to be Jesus' earthly, legal father meant that he would have to abandon his plans and surrender to God's plan. As long as I can remember, following Jesus Christ and responding to God's instruction has been offered to us lowly humans as a sure-fire way to lose ourselves; to lose our agency, to lose our wealth, our will, our sanity, certainly to lose our freedom. But there is a bigger truth here than simply 'sacrifice'.

One of the most shocking things I learned in my exploration for our talk today is the Hebrew translation for the name Mary. In Hebrew, Mary (or Miriam) means: contradiction; rebellious outcry.

In my church upbringing, I have been taught that Mary is the female, caring, loving, inner soul of expression of my faith. And I don't deny that is true, but what I understand now is that that peace, that nurturing is born of the need to nurture that which is set in motion to fix what is wrong in our world. Mary creates HOPE while being the Contradiction and Rebellious outcry of her time that sees what was ordinary and accepted in a new way. Sees that which has been 'the status quo' and ACTIVELY consents, no matter what the cost, to the birth of Christ to bring everything into order, set things straight from where they have gone off the rails. From stagnant imperfection toward God's perfect world.

When we see a problem and say, "I am too small to tackle that" "I'm just one voice and one voice can't make a difference." I invite you, like Joseph, seek those who are "Marys"... skilled, or Intune, or on the job and support them, protect them, to mend God's world. Dare to be a Joseph, dare to protect those who are making change. Dare to be in the background, but firmly protecting the Christ to be born in this world. Dare to be shamed, but courageously protecting the Christ to grow in this world.

Oh, yes, Mary's realization and rebellion to that which has gone awry, gone from God, and Joseph's courage, compassion and absolute "YES" I'm there, Lord, are what you and I can put on, to grow God's Kingdom right here.

Three weeks ago, Paula invited us to create HOPE as we, following the way of Christ, begin to see ordinary things, things that we expect, in new ways. Two weeks ago, Garry offered us the insight that repentance is an opportunity, a time when we see with clarity our behaviours that are not helpful; last week, Davidd reminded us that it is in 'giving up of one's life that all may live and live abundantly... rejoicing'.

People may call us crazy or even try to SHAME us with their facts about our religion and our trust in God, but Joseph is our guide. Trust in God, lean on God's promise, and be courageous when we are shown the path.

This is what the LOVE of Advent preaches; that LOVE is faith, believing in God's promise and having courage to protect that which we may not even see. Love your God and with trust and courage protect that which brings Christ into an imperfect world that is surely on its way to perfection, because God promises that. AMEN