

*A SERMON ON JOSEPH*  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on December 18, 2022

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

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 with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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 sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

**I** realized something last week when I looked at today's gospel reading: In twenty years, I've never preached a sermon on Joseph. I've preached sermons on Mary. I've preached sermons on the shepherds and the wise men. I've preached sermons on the angels that appeared in the sky above the fields. I even preached a sermon once on the owner of the inn, who didn't have any rooms to spare. But I've never preached a sermon on Joseph, which seems like a glaring omission. Then again, Joseph gets overlooked a lot.

I can't think of any theologians who've had much to say about him. Artists have long tended to focus more on Mary and the baby. If Joseph does show up in the occasional painting, he's usually off to the side, looking a little bit awkward, like he doesn't know what to do with himself. In movies and plays, he's generally a minor character, with maybe a few lines of dialogue. And if you're looking for songs about Joseph, you're going to have to look pretty hard. Out of all the Christmas hymns in our hymnal, I could only find two that make even a

passing reference to him. There are literally more lines in there about sheep than there are about Joseph.

Even in the New Testament, Joseph only makes an appearance in two of the four gospels—Matthew and Luke. John mentions his name a couple of times, in verses where Jesus is identified as “the son of Joseph,” but he never shows up in person; and Mark never mentions him at all.

Somehow that doesn’t seem right. But I have a feeling Joseph wouldn’t have cared. He was a carpenter, a skilled laborer, which means he was part of the ninety-five percent of the population that barely scraped by. He wouldn’t have had time to care about not being the center of attention. He would’ve been too busy earning a living, and providing for his new family, and keeping a roof over their heads.

But this morning, for one brief moment before Christmas comes and others take center stage, the spotlight is on Joseph—a man through whom God was able to do an extraordinary thing—not because he himself was extraordinary; not because he was someone special; not because he stood out in any particular way; but because he was righteous. At least, that’s how it seems at first glance.

That’s really all Matthew has to say about Joseph—that he’s a righteous man. And what makes him righteous in this reading is how he responds

when he finds out Mary is pregnant. The two of them are engaged, which doesn’t mean what it means today. Today you ask someone to marry you, and if they say yes, you’re engaged. And once you’re engaged, there really aren’t any rules you have to follow. You can get married now or later. In the meantime, you can live together or not. And if one of you changes your mind, you can just walk away.

That’s not how it was for Mary and Joseph. Back then, when people got engaged, they were entering into a legally binding contract with specific terms: usually a one-year engagement period, during which they would not live together, and they would not have “relations,” as Matthew puts it. And if one of them wanted to break the contract for whatever reason, they couldn’t just walk away. There was a formal process they had to go through, and under Jewish law, they had certain options they could exercise.

That’s where we are this morning.

Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, and since he knows he’s not the father, that can only mean one thing: Mary has been unfaithful, which gives Joseph cause for calling off the marriage and dissolving their relationship. And being a righteous man, he looks to the law to tell him how to do that.

That’s what righteous means in this context. It doesn’t have anything

to do with being pious or devout. It's much more specific than that. It means that in all things you obey God's will as it's revealed in the law. And under the law, Joseph has two choices. He can bring charges and publicly accuse Mary of adultery; in which case she could be put to death by stoning. Or he can sign divorce papers in front of two witnesses and give them to her privately, in which case she wouldn't face any punishment.

However, there would still be some pretty serious consequences. She'd be pregnant with no one to support her. Her only hope would be to stay with her family, but there's a good chance they wouldn't let her stay because she'd be a liability. In a world where ninety-five percent of the people struggled to survive, she'd be one more mouth to feed along with her baby.

So being a righteous man, Joseph follows the law and makes his choice. And what he chooses is the least bad option for Mary. He chooses to quietly divorce her, and I can only imagine what that decision was like for him. I can only imagine what he was feeling. As far as he knows, his fiancée cheated on him, so he must be feeling hurt, and angry, and disappointed, and humiliated. They live in a small town, and it's only a matter of time before everyone finds out what happened.

But his response shows concern, not vindictiveness. He doesn't want to see her punished, and he certainly doesn't want to see her die. So there must be a part of him that still cares about her and doesn't want to see her come to any harm.

And yet, at the end of the day, he makes a decision that could very well put her out on the street. And maybe that's the best he can do. Maybe he's bound by custom. But I can't help wondering, if he really does care about her, couldn't he find some other way? Couldn't he say the baby is his and face the consequences with Mary, instead of her facing them alone? Couldn't he run away with her and start a new life in some other town, where nobody knows them?

I don't know. Maybe it's asking too much to ask him to follow his heart instead of the law. That would be asking him to put his will above God's will. That would be asking him to be an *un*-righteous man, and maybe that's just not who he is.

The interesting thing about this story is, we never find out for sure.

Joseph makes his decision, but he never has to go through with it because God intervenes. An angel of the Lord comes to him in a dream and says, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her womb is from the Holy Spirit." So it turns out all this consternation and hand-

wringing was over nothing. There was never any reason for Joseph to break off the engagement. He never had anything to worry about. Mary was never unfaithful. It was all a big misunderstanding.

And now that the truth is out, the way is clear for the two of them to get married, and for Joseph to be a father to Mary's baby and keep his righteousness intact. It's a perfect Hollywood ending. Everything gets resolved, and everyone's happy. Which makes me wonder, *What's the point?* How does this story fit into the larger story? Why does Matthew take what seems like a narrative detour? Why does he put the spotlight on Joseph for this one brief moment, and then never focus on him again?

I think because this story shows us something about how God's will comes into the world. It's not through the law. It's through our lives—our complicated, messy, imperfect lives.

The one thing Matthew has to say about Joseph is that he's a righteous man. But his righteousness exposes his humanness—his contradictions, his ambiguities, his struggles. Is he a good person because he does what he's supposed to do? Or is he a bad person because he doesn't do what he should do? Is he a strong person because he makes a difficult choice? Or is he a weak person because he chooses not to stand by the person he loves?

None of us can really say because God intervenes, and we never get a clear answer. All we can say for sure about Joseph is that he's a person, just like you and me, and I think *that's* the point. God's will comes into the world through all of us; the gospel unfolds through all of us; Christ is born through all of us—not because we're extraordinary; not because we're special; not because we stand out in any particular way; and not because righteous, but because God is good and gracious, and God sees us as worthy, and God chooses to make us part of the story just as we are. Amen.