



December 11, 2005

Matthew 1:18-25
When You're Not Mary
Third Sunday of Advent
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Joseph is relegated to a supporting role in the Christmas narratives. Mary, the Shepherds, the Wise Men — even Herod — get more press than he does. But Joseph doesn't seem to want as much attention as he gets. All he really wanted was a relatively quiet life. He has plans to be a carpenter, get married to his fiancée Mary, take care of his tax problem in Bethlehem, and then settle down to a quiet life in Nazareth. But all of those realistic plans were shattered when Mary was found to be with child.

Some of us, I know, have trouble understanding the virgin birth. But I assure you Joseph had a much harder time with this than you do. This was not in the plan.

Being engaged, or betrothed to marriage, was a bit different in his day than in ours. There were three stages to the process. It began with cutting the deal: the contract was arranged by families and witnessed by two outsiders. An announcement was made and gifts were exchanged. Secondly, came the period of betrothal. This lasted one year, insuring that the groom was getting a virgin. During this period the woman was called "wife" and the engagement could only be released by a "divorce." Thirdly, all of this was consummated at the marriage feast, after which the groom took the bride to his home.

It was during the year-long period of betrothal that Mary had to tell Joseph she was pregnant. Wouldn't you love to have been in on that conversation? Did she tell him herself? Did she try to explain the part about the Holy Spirit conceiving this child in her womb? Did Mary cry as she tried to make Joseph understand? We don't know. All we know is that it was too much for Joseph. But being a "righteous man" he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So he planned to simply dissolve the marriage quietly. It was the best plan he could come up with. But he had to be heartbroken.

Joseph wasn't even consulted about this. By the time he heard about it from Mary all the decisions had been made and all the actions had happened. Joseph just learns that his fiancée is pregnant, that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that the child is even named already. And all of his quiet careful plans have been overwhelmed by more hope than he can handle.

Last week I spoke to you about the great interruption by God in the life of the Virgin Mary — how he conceived hope in her womb, and how she thought it would be her ruin even though it turned out to be her, and our, salvation. But Mary had commitments. She had people who needed her, and were counting on her, and had made plans with her. So although it is Mary's life that is directly interrupted by God, as a result, Joseph's life was never again the same.

This is very important — in the continuing drama of the gospel, not everyone can be Mary. To this day, God is still breaking into human lives, but not always your life. Sometimes it is the life of a person you love that is caught up in the intensity of God's work. When that happens, you are not the star of the drama. Like Joseph, you are given a supportive role. This isn't necessarily an easier role. In some ways it may even

be a harder role because Joseph has to watch salvation emerge in the life of someone else. And it costs him a lot to do that. But that is what it means to be Joseph. It means that your life is dramatically changed by the work of God in the life of someone else.

This last year, and certainly in the year ahead, some of you will be Mary and some will be Joseph. Some of you will directly experience the interruption of God, and others of you will never be the same as a result. Maybe the person whose life is interrupted will be a parent, or a spouse, or a child, or a close friend. Maybe you will get the news over the holidays. Maybe it will be something wonderful like an engagement — you're getting a new son-in-law. Maybe it will be something frightening like an engagement — you're getting a new son-in-law. Maybe it will be something awful like a disease, a terrible accident, divorce, or even the death of someone you need in your life.

When you discover this is happening to someone you love, like Joseph you will be tempted to come up with some new plans. Maybe you will plan to resist this unwanted interruption, or maybe you will plan to manage it, or maybe, like Joseph, you will plan to distance your life from this person whose life is so clearly out of control. But the problem with our little plans is that they have a way of putting us to sleep. We may still be walking around, but we are hardly paying attention anymore. We are too focused on our plans to wake up to the reality of a God at work in our lives.

Joseph fell asleep right after he developed his new plan — as if that isn't a metaphor. But while he was sleeping an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream and said, "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 the people from their sins...." Now, that's a dream.

Most of us have far too many plans and not nearly enough dreams. Plans are the reasonable expectations we set for ourselves. Dreams are the things angels bring us from God — and they always lead to salvation. We tend to divide life between the sunny side and the dark side that we try to avoid. We assume that anything resembling a blessing from God will come as sunshine. But God created the dark as well as the day, and we have to be careful about abandoning the dark disappointments so quickly. We may miss a dream, which comes most often in the dark.

Since God's dream for Joseph was to take Mary into his home, that meant he was dreaming for Joseph to share in her scandal. I find that when a baby is born shortly after a wedding, people become remarkably good at math. Everyone will assume that, since he didn't divorce Mary, it must be because the baby she is carrying is his baby. So in taking Mary into his home, Joseph is taking in the scandal as his own.

Also, in ancient societies single men did not live in bachelor pads. Joseph, like all men in his day, probably lived with aging parents, and a couple of widowed aunts. That means he has some hard conversations of his own to handle over Christmas. Thus, there are others, related to Joseph, whose lives are also interrupted by the virgin birth. So the interruption traveled from Mary, to Joseph, to the in-laws, to the whole related village. And this is the dream of God? Absolutely. Central to the Christmas message is God's great dream that we all discover that our lives are interrupted when Jesus Christ is born among us.

The advent of the Christ Child reveals that this whole world is more connected than we may want it to be. As we come to receive the interruption of what God has conceived in the lives of those we love, it is a small step to realize how connected we are to the pathos of those we don't even know. The pathos of Iraq and the Middle East is not unrelated to you. Neither is the child in Africa whose mother has died from AIDS. Neither is the old man you saw talking to himself as he shuffled down the street. Neither is the elegant family in church that is being torn apart by alcoholism. The dream of God is that we not distance ourselves from any of this. God dreams that we will join Joseph by taking in these great scandals of the world as we bring them home, pray for their needs, and give generously to help their relief.

Remember, according to the angel, this child, born to Mary, would save the people from their sins. A strict theological definition of sin is that it is anything that separates us from God. And so the whole mission of Christ is to bring home anyone who has been pulled from God, whether by the failures of others or their own. This means that once a Savior is born in this world, you cannot cradle him to your breast without discovering that he is dragging the world into your heart.

Imagine what would happen this Christmas if all who are celebrating the birth of the Savior realized that even in his arrival he has woven us all together. What would happen in our world if we simply owned all the scandals? What would happen if no one was abandoned, and we all began to see that Christmas is about hope for the whole world?

I can answer that. We would see "Peace on Earth." I know, it sounds like a dream. It is. It's God's dream. Amen.

