

**Sermon Notes – December 13, 2020**

*“Joseph Teaches Us Many Things”*

(Matthew 1:18-25)

I want you to notice several things in this gospel lesson: The first is the mercy, compassion, and decency of Joseph; secondly I want you to understand his fear had to fade into trust and faith in God even when he didn't understand all that was going on with him; thirdly, he was a humble carpenter who lived in a little tiny town of Nazareth in Galilee, and God chose him to be a part of His salvation plan for the world through adopting Jesus as his earthly son.

Have you ever been caught in one of those situations where you're fearful – you're afraid of something – and somebody will come up and say, “Oh that's nothing. Don't be afraid. I've been through that. I've done that. It's nothing”? Well guess what? ... It is something when it's you and you have real fear. Joseph was fearful in this story and we're going to talk about that. Have you ever had one of those situations in which you've done something wrong and somebody could've been mean, vengeful, and nasty to you, but they chose to be kind, merciful, and decent? I want you to think about that as we look at the life of Joseph in our gospel lesson today.

In our story, the first scenario that I want you to consider is Joseph discovering that Mary is pregnant. Now keep in mind, in those days that two families (the bride's and the groom's family) would get together and negotiate a price for the bride and the groom's family would pay a certain price to the bride's father. They would sign an agreement and then they would make a public announcement. The bride and groom would then be declared engaged or betrothed. Now it was more serious than an engagement today because it could only be broken by death or divorce. When they signed that agreement and had announced it, they became engaged, but they did not live together. They lived with their separate parents, and they did not have relations with one another.

Now also keep in mind -- after the angel had appeared to Mary, Mary went for three months to live with her cousin Elizabeth and husband Zacharias. So, in the first three months of her pregnancy, she is living out of town. Obviously, she has come back to town and Joseph sees her. Maybe he noticed the bump in her stomach; maybe she has some morning sickness; we don't know. But Joseph knows she is pregnant and that it is not his baby because he has not had relations with her. He's upset. We don't know in the scriptures how he felt, but I can only imagine that he felt hurt, angry, and betrayed. "How could you do this, Mary? How could you jeopardize our future? Why would you betray me and hurt me like this?" The only thing that we know is that Mary told him that the angel had appeared to her and told her that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. The angel told her that his name would be Jesus and he would be the son of the most high God. She shares this information with Joseph and Joseph is probably overwhelmed.

Now - Joseph had two choices based on the Jewish law at that time: Number one, he could divorce her publically - humiliate and shame her - and the Jewish law could have her stoned to death. But he didn't want to do that. You see, he loved her and as much as she had hurt him, he had enough decency and righteousness about him (as a man of God and close in the Jewish faith) that he didn't want to do that to her. ***He was merciful, compassionate, and decided to dismiss her quietly - to divorce her with two witnesses. That's the first thing I want you to notice. Joseph was merciful, compassionate, and decent when he could've been mean, nasty, selfish, hurtful, and revengeful.***

The second thing I want you to notice is that after he's decided to dismiss her quietly, he goes home and takes a nap. Can't you imagine that he says, "I can't deal with this right now. I've got to go away. We'll talk about it later"? According to the scriptures, he had a dream and in the dream, an angel appeared to him. In the Old Testament, it was not unusual for God to speak to the prophets through a dream (examples: Abraham, Moses, Daniel, etc.). He spoke to them often in dreams to give them a message for the people of God. Joseph was steeped in the Jewish

faith, so he would have known this about God speaking through dreams. The angel appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, don’t be afraid.” “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you will give him the name Jesus - for he will save his people from their sins.” Joseph wakes up from that dream and can’t you imagine that he’s thinking, “Was this a figment of my imagination? Is this really true? Did God really appear to me through an angel and give me a message?” ***I want you to notice in the scripture, it said that he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him to do -- he embraced the pregnant Mary and he embraced the birth of this child and he went on to name him Jesus.*** He was obedient to the angel’s message from God.

Have you ever been afraid of the future - or this COVID virus? Did you feel fear and anxiety the first time you became a parent - the first time you were a Mom or a Dad? “Will I be a good parent? Can I do this? I’m not sure I’m ready.” Can’t you imagine that Joseph had some of that fear? But, on top of that, this was not his biological child and the angel of the Lord was asking him to adopt Jesus and raise him as his earthly son. ***God was inviting him to become a part of God’s plan for salvation. Joseph didn’t understand the whole thing, but he was willing to trust and have faith in God. He was fearful - just like you and me, but he was willing to trust God and believe that God would enable him to do what was necessary for Jesus.***

I want you to think a moment about mercy. I heard a good definition of it. One scholar says that the Aramaic understanding of “merciful” is “to get into somebody else’s skin.” Now I’ve got a cute story that I want to share with you about a Presbyterian Minister who was leading a workshop at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina. He was at the retreat center on Saturday, doing his workshop, and all these people were there. There was a husband and wife sitting on the front row, and the husband kept falling asleep. (You know we ministers don’t like for people to go to sleep when we’re talking, right?) Well, this husband was going to sleep, and the preacher was getting distracted because the man was on the front row. In his head, he said, “Why in the world didn’t that guy stay

home if he was that sleepy?” The funny thing was, at lunch time, the man’s wife came to the preacher and said, “I just want to thank you for your message today and how much it meant to me. I want to apologize for my husband. He’s undergoing chemotherapy treatments and one of the medications he takes causes him to fall asleep easily. Every time he sits down, he wants to go to sleep.” The preacher said that he felt like he could crawl under the table. “Here I was judging this man and I began to think, ‘what if that was me?’ and I was getting judged that harshly?”

Sometimes we need to get into other people’s skin and I think that’s a part of what Joseph did. He loved Mary so much that as much as she had hurt him, he did not want to disgrace her or shame her. He had decided to dismiss her quietly, but God had a better option for him -- God gave him the option to not abandon this child and to go ahead and marry Mary. That it was going to be okay. That is was in God’s plan. That took a lot of faith, a lot of trust, didn’t it? ***He was fearful, but he had to trust in God and he did, even when he didn’t understand.***

Sometimes God calls you and me to trust Him when we don’t understand the whole situation. You and I may be placed in some difficult circumstance or situation that is not of our making, yet God asks us to trust Him - that He’s still behind the scenes and working out the details even when we don’t understand. Isaiah the prophet said of God, “His ways are higher than our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.” We don’t always understand or see the bigger picture that God has in mind.

Several years ago when I gave my brother a kidney, one of the things I realized was that I had to go through two heart catheterizations. I had never had one of those in my life. I was 30-years of age. When I went through the first catheterization, I had a bad reaction. I’m allergic to the dye and I did not know it. In fact, I’m very allergic to IVP dye. I don’t react like a normal person in an hour or an hour and a half, I do it in two hours on the dot. But, I have an internal and an external reaction - half of my body turns red, then the other half turns red, and then I go into slow-motion talking and speaking, and my lack of oxygen can shut down

everything. When I got ready to go again for the second, the doctor says, “We really need to do another heart catheterization because we need to make sure that you only have one renal artery going to your kidney -- if you have two arteries and your brother only has one, there will be a connection problem.” The doctors told me - “We had a blurb - or something you couldn’t see in the first one, so we really need to do a second one. That means you have to sign and give us permission because you could die.” That is not an exciting proposal! On top of that, it was right before Christmas. I had to pray and decide, “God, do you want me to go through this? I have been through months of testing - am I ready to go through this?” I had to leave it with God. My brother kept saying, “Sis, you don’t need to feel like you have to give me this kidney.” I said, “We’ve been through six months of testing and we’ve gotten down to this point. Somehow I feel like if it’s supposed to be, it will. I just have to leave it in God’s hands - and if I die, I’m ready to go.” I want you to know that was one of those situations that I wasn’t very comfortable with and I was still afraid the day that I went through it. I want you to know that God carried me through because I had to put myself in His hands. I did have another reaction, but they got me through it, and as you know, I was able to give my brother one of my kidneys. (But, the doctors told me not to do the catheterization again with IVP dye, because it could definitely be lethal.)

I want you to know that we all have to deal with those situations that can make us uncomfortable and fearful. ***When we are most fearful and vulnerable, it’s the time that God is asking us to trust Him with the details and the big picture when we can’t see it.*** I know of families that have had to deal with problems with their kids and other things that are outside of their comfort zone. Sometimes you just have to trust God and let your fear fade into faith and hope in Him. Sometimes God calls us to be merciful and compassionate and decent as brothers and sisters in Christ even when we are hurt - even when we think that somebody has done something to hurt us. *(Maybe they intended to and maybe they didn’t, but God calls us to live at a higher standard.)*

I want you to know that Joseph was merciful and compassionate. He was decent. He had two options: divorce her publically or divorce her privately. But God gave him a third option - "Don't be afraid to take her as your wife and embrace this child." Here was Joseph who felt small and insignificant. He's just a humble carpenter. "Why's this happening to me? What do I have to do with this?" God had something bigger for him even when he didn't quite understand it. Sometimes you and I may think that we can't make a difference in the world, but we can. We may feel like our little difference won't make that much difference - but it will because God wants to use us in His kingdom work.

God had an important place for Joseph. Have you ever noticed in the Christmas Pageant that Joseph is one of the most silent people in the play? The only line that he usually has is, "Is there any room in the inn?" and he's standing there with Mary, the baby, and the animals. *But he had an important part to play in Christ's birth. He was merciful and compassionate to Mary. He obeyed and trusted God when he didn't fully understand. He may have felt small and insignificant, but he chose to believe that God could use him in His salvation history - and God did.*

I want to challenge you this Christmas and throughout the year - let us live as decent Christians -- merciful, compassionate -- even when people may hurt us, intentionally or unintentionally. I want us to grow in trusting God even when we're fearful. People say, "Don't be afraid. I've done that. I've been there." But it's a different story when it's us, isn't it? We do and it's real and God knows it - and sometimes we just have to grow through that fear, learning to trust God that He's always with us. May God bless us this Christmas. Amen.