

Matthew 1:18-25

Mary, the mother of Jesus had consented to allow the Holy Spirit to conceive a boy, the Messiah, in her womb. She did this without fear of the outcome, trusting that God would make it right. And God did. Joseph, we rarely hear about Joseph, Joseph was a good righteous man.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed. In the days of Jesus this was more than an engagement; this was a legal agreement that the two would be wed. It could be any length of time but was usually a year. It included a dowry; a price the bride's family paid to the groom's family for the privilege of the marriage.

When Joseph realized Mary was expecting a child that was not his he was going to quietly divorce her. He could have made a big deal. He could have had her publicly shamed, even stoned to death. But Joseph would be kind, and besides, wasn't Mary a bit crazy to proclaim that this child was from the Holy Spirit... would a sane woman claim such a thing? No, he was going to be kind, divorce her quietly, and be on his way.

Not so quickly! An angel came to Joseph in a dream, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife." So many times when an angel approaches a human we hear the phrase, "Do not fear" but this time there is something added that has nothing to do with fearing the angel. No, this time it is "do not fear to take Mary as your wife." Why? Because what Mary has told you is true, the baby does not have a human father, the baby is from God.

Have you ever thought how much more difficult this would have been for Mary had Joseph not followed through with what the angel told him? I've always just accepted that, ok, Joseph agreed to do what the angel told him. But Joseph had a choice. And being a righteous man he chose to do the right thing. This was not going to be as easy for him as we have been led to believe... Had he divorced Mary everyone would have laid the blame on her, saying she was with another man. However, not ending the betrothal would lead others to believe that the child was Joseph's and the couple would be shamed for not being able to control themselves and waiting for the wedding before having relations. That could have gone beyond people talking behind their backs, and possibly would have led to economic doom in such a judgmental culture because no one would trust a person with such lack of control. Yet we know how much control Joseph actually had.

For such an important piece in the life of Jesus we never hear a word that Joseph said. We hear his faith speaking loudly as he follows God's will. Through his obedience we learn what faith looks like in its powerful simplicity.

Faith obeys what it doesn't understand and what doesn't make sense. Joseph agreed to raise a son who was not his own. He did not receive any proof in his dream that the child was of God, only a promise that the boy who was to be named Jesus would take away people's sins.

Have you ever been asked to step out in faith even though things don't make sense? When the diagnosis is not good? When you don't know if you've been told a lie? When the cost of everything is skyrocketing and you're asked to make a donation? Real faith steps up even when it makes no sense, when the world would say forget it, when the pieces just don't fit together. Joseph's faith was obedient; he stepped up and stayed with Mary even though it made no sense. He protected Mary and raised Jesus as his own child. He didn't need everything to make perfect sense in order to obey God's instruction.

Faith chooses mercy over judgement. Joseph was going to act mercifully even before the angel appeared to him. He was going to act in a way that would not have put Mary in the public eye by divorcing her quietly. His first thought was full of mercy; even though it seemed as though Mary had been unfaithful Joseph chose to protect her reputation.

We don't usually see this kind of mercy in today's world. For the most part people are quick to judge and slow to forgive. Joseph is a model of grace. He did not seek retribution or judgment. Joseph reminds us that faith chooses mercy even when judgment seems justified. His quiet compassion was merciful. Joseph trusted the angel because he had faith.

A faith that was strong enough to be gentle. When we think of strength we often think of powerful, dominant people with stern or loud voices. Throughout history we have seen many mean people rise to power. But Joseph is not mean. He models the strength to be gentle. He protects Mary, journeys to Bethlehem with her and cares for the Christ child with tenderness. Later, because of a message in another dream, he protects them again by fleeing from Herod's rule. He takes his family to Egypt, trusting God every step of the way.

Strength does not have to be loud to be strong. Gentleness sometimes takes strength. Being able to soothe a crying child, praying for a person who is in the midst of trials and tribulation, listening when others walk away are examples of gentle strength.

Joseph had enough faith to stay in the background of the Christmas story, allowing Mary and baby Jesus to stand out. Joseph allows God's plan to play out without speaking a single word. He demonstrates that the truest measure of devotion is not how much attention we receive, but how much glory shines upon God. What we do in faith isn't always what grabs the limelight, sometimes it's the behind the scenes work that allows God to shine.

Joseph is quietly faithful, and often because of this he is overlooked. Our culture oils the squeaky wheel. Those who shout, shove and argue get the attention. Joseph, in his faithful obedience, stands in the shadows. It's no wonder that in addition to being the patron saint of the quietly faithful, he is also known as the patron saint of fathers, workers, refugees and those who quietly serve behind the scenes. His life reminds us that faithful obedience is its own kind of greatness.

His is a faith that speaks in silence. Although Joseph's voice is never heard in the Bible, his life is all the sermon we need to hear:

Trust God, even when the path is unclear.

Choose mercy, even when you're hurting.

Be faithful, even when no one sees or applauds.

As we approach Christmas Day, may we remember not just the manger, the star and the shepherds — but also the man who quietly stood beside Mary, held the child in his arms, and said with his life, "Yes, Lord."

All glory be to God.