

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Matthew 1:18-25
December 22, 2024

Hope is Worth the Risk

I had the privilege this week of attending a 21st birthday party for one of my former Young Life students. Now you might be thinking, what is our pastor doing at a 21st birthday party...particularly if it was anything like our own...with a lot of drinking and irresponsible behavior...but this was not at all like that.

Charles' father had thoughtfully planned this out for years. He invited about 15 men of various ages, from grandfathers, uncles, friends, pastors, youth pastors, bosses, and Young Life leaders. Godly men, surrogate father figures, who have known and loved Charles through his growing up years and who had spoken truth into his life.

This would our chance to pass along our bits of wisdom and blessing as he embarked upon his young adult journey.

We each had thought through what we would say, or what we wished someone had said to us, to this young man who literally has the world before him. There were tears. There was laughter. It was so powerful.

It made me think about our scripture today and the power of Godly mentors who step in and selflessly invest themselves in people who aren't their children.

Hands down, beside Jesus himself, Joseph is my favorite character in the Christmas story. I also believe that he is one of the most under represented and appreciated people. A young man, who made the very difficult decision to trust God, stand his ground and risk hope, when everything and everyone, around him said run.

Please join me in reading Joseph's story and the birth of Jesus from Matthew 1:18-25.

18 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. **19** Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. **20** 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. **21** She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." **22** All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

According to statistics from The Step Family Foundation website, “the majority of families in America have shifted from the original biologically bonded mother, father and child. We are now a nation in which the majority of families are divorced. Most go on to remarry or form other living together relationships.”¹ But, more so than ever, children are not being raised solely by their biological parents... but by step parents. This is an often looked over detail given the fact that the Holy family...was by and large...a step parenting arrangement. So today’s sermon is dedicated to all of the step families out there.

As we look at Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, I want to focus on the character of Joseph, Jesus’ step father. We will see how he was righteous. He was courageous. He was obedient. He was faithful. We will also see how Joseph in choosing to stay with Mary and Jesus somehow thought that hope was worth the risk. And finally we will consider what God might be calling us to risk in hope today.

So first let’s dive into the character of Joseph of Nazareth.

According to different faith traditions, it is believed that Joseph was either a young man of about 17 years old or an much older man who had yet to marry. Regardless, he was a hardworking, blue collar, carpenter from the small town of Nazareth which was known as the armpit of Galilee. Nazareth did not have a good reputation among the Jews. Many people married non Jewish folks which would have disqualified for being able to worship in the Jerusalem temple.

Joseph, however, came from a godly lineage of faithful Jews. His father was Jacob. And his family line could be traced all the way back to Bethlehem with King David. But this isn’t what made Joseph right before God.

It was his heart.

Somehow Joseph was known as being a righteous man...like King David. He was a man after God’s own heart.

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. The Greek word for righteous comes from the root word diakios. Diakios was the same word used to describe the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. It can be translated as correct,

¹ <https://www.stepfamily.org/stepfamily-statistics.html>

righteous, or just. It can also mean innocent by implication. In other words, Joseph was clearly assumed to have done nothing wrong to violate his fiancé before they were married and that it was known that he would do the right thing before God when faced with a difficult decision.

Notice that while Matthew clearly names Mary as Jesus' mother and Joseph as her husband, he says virtually nothing of Joseph being Jesus' father. But somehow, though we don't get the back story, Joseph found out that Mary was with child by some other means than himself. And since they were betrothed or engaged to married, but she was now pregnant, the scripture tells us that Joseph had in mind to divorce her quietly and go on his way.

Folks this was completely acceptable action and within his rights according to the marriage contract that had been arranged by Joseph and Mary's families. Nazareth was a small town. And in small towns news travels fast. People far and wide would have heard of the shame and disgrace that had fallen upon this young couple. Both Joseph and Mary's reputations along with their families would have been sorely tarnished.

So Joseph had every right to publicly shame Mary in return to clear his name. He was innocent. He hadn't done anything wrong. Unfortunately in that day, the burden of proof fell on the woman, not the man. In fact the Old Testament commanded that such a young woman in Mary's estate be stoned to death for her alleged marital unfaithfulness.²

Author Kelley Nikondeha in her book *The First Advent in Palestine* states, "A man in Joseph's position could ask for economic compensation in addition to the divorce - the impounding of the dowry and possible return of the bride price."³ In Jesus' day, the standard dowry was about 50 shekels of silver and would have been paid by Joseph to Mary's father. Five ancient shekels was the equivalent of 100 grams of pure silver. So 50 shekels of silver would have been 1000 grams of pure silver or about \$18,000 US Dollars today. Back then, that would have been a lot of money to a poor family from Nazareth.

But Joseph's character was such that he saw his marriage as more than an economic contract that he could use to his advantage. Joseph saw Mary and her unborn child. He had compassion for them. He was kind toward them. Perhaps he thought, if the shoes were switched, how would I want Mary to treat me? Much later on, we will hear Joseph's son say, "Do onto others the same that you would want to be done onto you." My friends apples don't fall far from the tree. Jesus must have heard this from Joseph, his step father.

² Deuteronomy 22:20-21

³ Kelly Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine, Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 118.

Divorcing Mary was not a decision he took lightly. No doubt he spent a lot of time in prayer over it. He pondered it. Considered it. Did not act rashly. He knew the implications that such a decision would have on Mary and her unborn child. And yet being who he was, he considered their needs as important than his own.

And it was at just that moment when Joseph was settled in his heart on the “right” direction to take, God intervened in a way that Joseph had not considered before. Maybe Mary’s unexpected pregnancy was a God thing.

Being righteous doesn’t mean that we do what is right for ourself. Being righteous means that we do that is right before God. And God’s heart looks at things very differently that we often do.

Joseph was courageous.

The angel Gabriel comes to Joseph in a dream and calls Joseph by his Biblical name. Joseph son of David. Not only did he remind him of who his father named him to be...Joseph...which meant “God shall add,” but he reminded him that he came from a long lineage of people who were also men after God’s own heart. It was as if he said, “You’ve got what it takes do what I am about to tell you. It’s in your genes!”

Now fear is the first emotion one experiences when encountering an angel. But the most terrifying part is what Gabriel tells Joseph to do.

"Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Talk about a head spin. Joseph would have to do an about face...remember that from last week...and head 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

Joseph faced a difficult decision. Accepting Mary as his wife meant breaking with Jewish custom, risking his reputation, his economical wellbeing, his future, his pride, his marriage, and raising a child that was not biologically his meant that he risked his role as “Father” in his family.

My friends, step parenting is not for the weak hearted. It is hard work. You have to feel called by God to step in and help parent another person’s child.

There are different connections with a step child as there are with birth children. From the moment that a child is born, a strong heart connection is established between parent and child. One never experienced before. It’s immediate and natural. When my children were born, my heart exploded in ways I never imagined.

There is not this immediate and natural bond with step children. It has be nurtured, developed slowly over time, with great intentionality. It requires courage, strength, and love that can only come from God. The same courage that Joseph embodied.

Next we see that Joseph was obedient to God. Notice how the scriptures tells us that once Joseph woke up from his dream, he immediately did what the Lord commanded of him. He took pregnant Mary home as his wife and when her son was born, Joseph faithfully gave him the name Jesus. What a privilege.

One final thing that this story shows us today is how Joseph was open and not closed to God's redirection in his life. Proverbs 16:9 states, "In their heart a person plans their course, but the Lord determines their steps." Joseph had a plan for his and Mary's lives. But God determined their steps by throwing a little wrench into those plans.

Remember this is no fault of his own. Joseph was chosen for this special role. God had fully equipped him to do what was set before him. To be Jesus' step father. A task that would require a great deal of risk and hope.

The Apostle Paul in writing to the Romans said, "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."⁴

Kayla Craig in her commentary on this text wrote, "It's vulnerable to hope. The more we hope, the more we can be disappointed. For those of us who bear scars from the hurt of this world, hope can feel scary—too risky, too unrealistic. Cynicism seems like a safer, more straightforward path. But cynicism doesn't change the world—*hope* does.

Hope challenges us to declare, "It can be better," and empowers us to make it so.

Our weary world doesn't need any more cynics and scoffers—but as wars rage and divisions heighten, we desperately need hope-bearers who point us to a better way, one where life is made new and lies of shame and fear don't have the final say. Our hope is a reflection of God's plans for the world—plans for renewal and restoration in the face of death and despair."⁵

I love that God chose to include the crazy, risky, hope of a step parent in the birth of his Son.

And so, I hope that our step parents today feel seen, valued, and appreciated for the important roles your play in our lives. You stepped in when we needed you most and perhaps were the father or mother that we needed when our birth parents could not. Thank you and God bless you for your selfless sacrifice.

My friends, how is the Spirit of God calling us this morning?

Are we being challenge to do what is right and not be pressured to follow a much easy route?

⁴ Romans 5:3b-5

⁵ Kayla Craig from "Words from the Beginning" through A Sanctified Art, 2024.

How can we show selfless love, compassion and kindness to others, even when it requires stepping into very difficult circumstances?

Can we trust the Holy Spirit to equip us for the role we are stepping into?

How might we sacrifice personal plans and preferences for God's will?

How can we choose hope knowing that it is worth the risk even if we don't know how it is all going to work out?

My friends, Joseph's story reminds us that true righteousness isn't about following rules, but about aligning our lives with God's plan. Like Joseph, we are called to follow God, no matter the cost.

As we celebrate Christmas, may we remember Joseph – the forgotten man of the nativity. May we strive to emulate his faith, courage, obedience, and openness to God in our own lives. And may we believe that hope is worth the risk when we are invited by the Holy Spirit to step in and make a difference in a young person's life, whether they are our children or not.

Breath prayer:

Inhale: Lead me, O God.

Exhale: My hope is in you.