

WAS JOSEPH REALLY RIGHTEOUS?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

This year, in the December issue of *First Notes*, our church newsletter, I wrote of the enviable role that the angel Gabriel plays in the story of Jesus' birth. Gabriel does not have as elegant a role as the three wise men, nor one as endearing as that of the shepherds, but without him, there would be no birth announcement. Someone has to come along and tell us the good news.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publishes peace...”¹ says Isaiah. And how right he is. One of the best parts in the entire Christmas narrative is Gabriel's role.

What a contrast by comparison is the drab role of Joseph. Poor old Joseph, the Rodney Dangerfield of the nativity story. He just can't get any respect.

Just about any kid can play his part in the annual Christmas pageant. He has no lines to memorize, no significant stage business to conduct, except to look kindly and sensitive as the adoptive father of Jesus. The spotlights are always on Mary who kneels closest to the manger or cradles the baby in her arms, while Joseph stands at a distance clueless, not even knowing how to lend a hand with the diapers.

History has not been kind to Joseph, he is mostly ignored. The Christmas Carols almost exclusively honor Mary, not Joseph in their piety. And so we have an abundance of hymns like... “Lo How a Rose, E'er Blooming,” “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child,” and “What Child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?”

The low point in hymnody for Joseph is that ancient hymn the Cherry Tree Carol,² in which Joseph is walking in a cherry orchard with Mary, who is great with child. Mary meekly asks Joseph to pick a cherry from one of the trees for her. And to her request he responds with Shakespearean bitterness, “Let him pluck thee a cherry that brought thee now with child.” In other words, ask the guy who got you in the family way to pick your fruit for you. Ooo, this is the stuff of marital counseling.

And then just to humiliate Joseph utterly, Jesus, so the carol goes, issues a command from his mother's womb that the tallest tree in the orchard bow down before her so that poor Mary can pick as many cherries as she can....” And that little episode, my friends, is a Freudian bonanza!

We hardly know what to do with Joseph. The Biblical witness is that the Holy Spirit is the father of the child, and that Mary is a virgin, which most serious Biblical scholars, which is to say those with whom I agree like the Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown, say that the words which are traditionally translated “virgin” are literally translated “young girl” thus opening a more fulsome discussion of what it was that the gospel intended by referring to her in this way.

Why is it that Joseph does not have a larger role in the Christmas story? Part of it has to do with the fact that there is so little information about him. Matthew tells us of the dream that Joseph has which reassures him that he should marry his betrothed. And

he dreams of a warning following the birth that he must take his family across the desert to Egypt to flee Herod's decree of death to all the first born males of Bethlehem town. But then we never hear of Joseph again.

We don't know what he taught his son of his trade. Whether he learned to change diapers or helped around the house, or whether he was a kindly man, the kind of man a son could admire, or whether he kept his feelings to himself and was hard to know.

Many have suggested that he died early in Jesus' life which is why we never hear of him again. But that is only speculation. We only know that after the birth, Matthew falls silent about him.

What Matthew does say about Joseph, however, is hard to take. Because Matthew says that after hearing about Mary's pregnancy, Joseph resolved to put Mary away quietly, *because he was a righteous man*. And we wonder about this righteousness in light of today's values. What kind of man walks away from his beloved in a time when she is most vulnerable, most exposed, most subject to scorn? Not that it was easy for either of them, mind you. But in what way does Matthew mean for us to understand Joseph as righteous?

Well in one sense, Joseph is opting for the least hurtful solution. The Torah required that a betrothed woman in Mary's condition, should be put to death by stoning. So resolving to end the matter quietly was a merciful and respectful solution against that measure of righteousness.

Furthermore, as was the custom of the day, if dishonor came to Mary, then it came to Joseph as well, especially as her betrothed, and so the news of Mary's pregnancy was a scandal in Nazareth. If you think Jamie Lynn Spears, the perfect teenager on Nickelodeon's *Zoey 101* is kicking up a storm of controversy about her real life pregnancy, imagine what it was like when a perfect girl like Mary from a good family in a small town like Nazareth became p-g.

"Did you hear about Mary?" "No, what?" "She's pregnant." "Really? And is Joseph the father?" "Well he says not. She has some story about an angel and the Spirit of the Lord overpowering her, and well, you know how kids are these days!" You can just imagine what they were saying in every barber shop and beauty parlor in town.

But Joseph was a righteous man, according to Matthew, and he wanted to do the right thing. His first thought was not to make a fuss, but to swallow his pride and to allow Mary to live this down, "dismiss her quietly" Matthew says; maybe go and live with some relatives in another town somewhere, and he would just go on, disappointed, sad, but not with Mary. After all, it was not his child. And who could believe that story that Mary was telling?

But then the angel came and told him not to be afraid. "Take Mary as your wife and raise the child as your own," the angel said. And Joseph was caught in the horns of a dilemma, being both a compassionate man and a righteous man.

Joseph lived according to the law. That was his righteousness. He knew the Torah, and abided by the rules. He kept the law in his heart and did not waver. He always colored inside the lines. But in this case the requirements of the law were not compassionate, and it left Joseph, because of his love for Mary, in an untenable position.

Then the angel came and told him not to be afraid, but to take Mary as his wife, reassuring him that the child was a holy child, begotten by God's will of the Holy Spirit. And what had seemed a moral outrage became instead a holy disruption. Something new that God was doing, that broke all the rules and defied all expectations.

Joseph will bridge the genealogical gap that God needed, in order to bring this child into the house of David. And even more, Joseph will serve as a bridge between what God had been doing up to that time through the law, with what God will be doing henceforth by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, who always colored inside the lines, risks everything, and trusts that promise of the angel and takes Mary as his wife. Which is why Joseph is the quiet hero in the story, a symbol of the new righteousness to which God calls us in Jesus Christ, a righteousness that exceeds our tendency to color only within the lines.

A.J. Jacobs, in his book **The Year of Living Biblically** describes what is known in Hebrew as the Chasid Shote. A righteous idiot. He says,

In the Talmud, there's a story about a devout man who won't save a drowning woman because he's afraid of breaking the [laws that forbid a man touching a woman during her menstrual cycle]... He's the ultimate fool.

The moral issue [writes Jacobs] is... Don't be so caught up in the regulations that you forget about the big things, like compassion and respect for life.³

Matthew's point about Joseph is that he is no Chasid Shote. He is a man whose compassion is an expression of his righteousness and his righteousness will be seen in the life of his son whose righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

There are innumerable stories about the wealth and eccentricity of Howard Hughes, the aviator, engineer, producer, director, and playboy. In his latter years, this brilliant and adventurous man became a hermit possessed by an obsessive compulsive disorder. He was deathly afraid of many things and most especially of germs, which he felt were everywhere and from which he wanted to be isolated and protected.

He was obsessed with the size of peas and he used a special fork to sort them before he ate. He had an aversion to shaking hands and toward the latter part of his life used tissues to pick up objects. It was not the reasoning of a sane man. But he lived by definite rules. Insane rules, admittedly, but he always knew where the lines were and where not to cross. Life may not be easily lived that way, but at least you know where you are all the time. The point is, the rules can drive you crazy if you let them.

In the religious realm, it's always easier to have set rules, fixed marks, definite requirements. Jesus was not very good at them, frankly. When his disciples walked through the fields on the Sabbath and they were hungry, they plucked grain, much to the consternation of the scribes and Pharisees. When someone needed healing on the Sabbath, he was not one to withhold his power. When the child of a leader in the synagogue lay apparently dead, he dared to touch her even though the Torah forbids touching the dead, and he brought her back to life.

He sat by Jacob's well in Sychar one day and engaged a Samaritan woman in pastoral counseling while the wagging tongues of every woman in town flailed about this unseemly meeting of a man and a woman with a history in broad daylight where everyone could see. And one day Jesus even blessed a woman caught *en flagranté dilecto*, chased by a mob of angry men ready to stone her to death of her sin. But he dispersed the crowd and waved away the requirement of the law by stating that the one who had not sinned should be the only one to cast the first stone.

Jesus drew outside the lines so much of the time. He was always doing what was compassionate and kind, exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees who hated him for it. But in him the grace, peace, and love of God was expressed in surprisingly extravagant ways.

Sometimes in life you have to fly by the seat of your pants. The rules don't fit the occasion very well, or the law is not clear. Then, perhaps, you have to do what Myles Davis that great jazz trumpeter used to say you should do, "Don't play what's there," he said, "play what's not there."⁴ If courage is not there, if kindness is not there, if justice is not there, if love is not there, it's likely not the right thing to do. That's what Joseph of Nazareth understood about righteousness. Righteousness must always have the right measure of courage, and kindness, and justice, and love.

One of my favorite stories of coloring outside the lines, of exceeding the expected is a story I have remembered with you before. It's a true story from Anne Lamott's book, **Traveling Mercies**. Lamott writes of her church in Marin City California, a Presbyterian Church if you can imagine, an African American congregation for the most part. A church mostly made up of elderly women and many of the rejects, human flotsam and jetsam, of that blue-collar section of town where the church is located.

Lamott discovered the church one day when the music drew her in from a Sunday morning flea market in a parking lot nearby. But she came to love the church and its people and their love of her even though at the time she first came she was alcoholic, drug addicted, single and pregnant.

A man by the name of Ken Nelson was a member of the church, a man with an advanced stage of AIDS. Shortly after Ken had started attending the church his partner, Brandon, died of the disease. Ken said that after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left, and had been there ever since. Ken had a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiled he was radiant. Lamott says he looked like God's crazy nephew Phil. And, Lamott said, Ken told us that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus and us.

There's a woman named Ranola who sings in the choir who is large and jovial and black and devout, and who was a bit standoffish toward Ken. She always looked at him sideways, if she looked at him at all because she was raised by Southern Baptists who taught her that his way of life – that he – was an abomination. It was always hard for her to break through that feeling, her confusion, and perhaps the idea that maybe she might catch what he had if she got too close.

Kenny attended every Sunday for over a year and eventually won over just about everyone. He missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month later

he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. But he talked joyously during the prayers of the people of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, and how safe and happy he felt.

Lamott's words now,

On this particular Sunday, for the first hymn... we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes, "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically, Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away, sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And when it came time for the second hymn, we were to sing "His Eye is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen – only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap – and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up – lifted up this rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me.⁵

We are standing today on tiptoe, waiting for the good news of a child who is born whose righteousness will exceed the law, and whose grace, mercy and peace will be our hope in this life. In him we will see the fullness of God indwelling. And in him we will see what happens when God draws outside the lines.

Thank God for Joseph, our example of a new kind of righteousness. Take heart, God is greater than you imagined, more loving than you thought, more gracious than you ever expected. Keep your eyes fixed on star movements, and listen closely for the beating of angel's wings, for God is about to do a marvelous thing. Just you wait and see.

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¹ This is my own modernized translation of the KJV.

² I am grateful to Theodore J. Wardlaw for his recollection of this carol, and its discussion in his article in the *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXXI, Number 1, Advent 2007. (Decatur, Georgia: Journal for Preachers, 2007) p. 8.

³ A.J. Jacobs, **The Year of Living Biblically**. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) p. 119

⁴ Quoted by Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies**. (New York: Pantheon, 1999) p. 253

⁵ Lamott, *Ibid.* 64-65.