

The Three Heroes of Christmas

Joseph * Matthew 1:18-25

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 1. If you are wondering if you heard me correctly, I did say Matthew 1, not Matthew 12 as originally planned. This past Monday, as I was beginning to think about today's message, I sensed that the Lord was leading me to do a series on Christmas. So, in an uncharacteristic move, I decided to scrap my original plans for the next couple of weeks and prepare a series entitled *The Three Heroes of Christmas*.

Now, just to be clear from the get go, the three heroes of Christmas are not Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, and Santa Claus. Neither are they Macauley Culkin, Buddy the Elf, and Clark Griswold, as fun as it might be to talk about those three. I know this might be disappointing to some of you, but the real meaning of Christmas has nothing to do with any of these characters.

That's because the real heroes of Christmas are found in our passage today, namely Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. This morning we are going to talk about Joseph, next Sunday we will talk about Mary, and then on Christmas Eve we will zero in on Jesus. Actually we will focus on Jesus in all three messages, but today and next Sunday we will specifically look at how Joseph and Mary help us to do so.

So, that said, let's read our passage for this morning and look at what it has to tell us about Joseph. Matthew 1:18-25:

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20** But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and*

you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25, ESV)

To be clear the primary intent of this passage is not to provide us with information about Joseph. However, there is a lot we can learn from him, things that because of the incredible significance of the events he is caught up in largely go unnoticed. And yet in this man we have, what I believe, to be one of the great heroes of the faith. It’s likely that you have never thought of him in that way but hopefully you will before the end of this message.

But before we talk about Joseph I am going to quickly point out the two major truths in this passage. I want to do so because they are absolutely massive, world and history-changing truths. In fact, there really aren’t any bigger truths than these two.

Two Important Christmas Truths

1. Christmas came about through the virgin birth.

The first is that Christmas came about through the virgin birth. Look at verse 23 again:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Now, as much as I would like to, I am not going to address the virgin birth this morning. I will hold off on that until next week, and trust me you are going to want to be here for it.

2. Christmas is about Jesus coming to save us from our sins.

The second massive truth in this passage is that Christmas is about Jesus coming to save us from our sins. We find this truth in verse 21:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Here, only 21 verses into the New Testament, we have spelled out what Christmas is all about. It's about the fact that Jesus came to save us from our sins. And church, this is, to use a common phrase this time of year, the reason for the season. This is what we will, or at least what we should celebrate over the next several weeks. The fact that the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, left His home in heaven and took on human flesh to one day die in our place so that we could be saved and have eternal life. So listen – and I know you know this – Christmas is not about lights and trees and presents and getting together with family. I am not saying there is anything necessarily wrong with these things. But what I am saying is they are not the point of Christmas. The point of Christmas is about *Immanuel* – *God with us*. I want to encourage you this Christmas season to be very careful not to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the holidays but to get caught up in worshipping the One who came to earth so that you might go to heaven. That's what Christmas is about. Can anyone say Amen to that?

Now, just so you know – I cannot pretend that what I just proposed is easy. You might think by what I just said that I'm some kind of Christmas Grinch. But that's not the case. I actually found myself slipping on this just last week. This Christmas will be Zane's first Christmas with us. And of course, he really doesn't have a whole lot of understanding of what it is all about. So one night a few weeks ago I was starting to try to explain it to him when all of a sudden I was horrified to realize I was completely talking about family and presents and wasn't mentioning Jesus at all.

That's what can happen so easily. We can get so caught up in all the stuff that we have created around Christmas that we forget what it's all about in the first place. So, let's make a covenant with one another not to do so this year. Let's celebrate Christmas big time – by making sure that Jesus is right at the center of it.

Ok, so let's take a look at our passage today and see what we can learn from a man that God used in a big way to bring the very first Christmas about. To do so, let's start with a little background.

Before the events of Matthew 1, Joseph was a pretty average 1st century Jewish guy living in the small backwater town of Nazareth. Nazareth was in the middle of nowhere, an unremarkable town of a few hundred people. Some might say that Nazareth was like the Denmark of SE Iowa, although I wouldn't go that far. Some people might, but not me. Anyways, sources differ as to how old he was, but my best guess is that he was somewhere around 18. On the other hand Mary, the woman to whom Joseph was betrothed, was likely 12 or 13 years of age.

Now, at this time Jewish marriages had three stages. The first was the engagement. Normally the parents of the couple would arrange the engagement, with the groom or the groom's parents paying some type of dowry to the bride's family. I have to admit that I have never found arranged marriages and dowries all that appealing until recent times as my daughters started hitting the teenage years. All of sudden they are starting to sound much more appealing. That's especially true given the fact that I read this week that American's are spending \$70 billion a year on weddings. That's right, \$70 billion. It made me think we really need to get back into the dowry business.

Anyways, the second stage of a marriage was the betrothal, where the couple agreed to be married, signed a binding legal document, and officially became husband and wife. However, the marriage would not be consummated at this time and the bride would continue to live with her parents as the groom began establishing a home of his own.

The third and final stage of the marriage would be the official wedding ceremony, which occurred about a year after the betrothal. However, at some point during the betrothal period Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. We don't know exactly how he found out – perhaps he noticed she was wearing stretchy pants or something - but nevertheless since he hasn't heard from God on the subject you can imagine his thoughts on the matter. He knew that the child wasn't his and so his first thought could have only been that Mary had cheated on him.

And I want to pause here for a second and ask you to consider how you would have handled this news. You have just found out your fiancé has cheated and is pregnant. What would you have done?

I'd have to imagine that most of us would have responded differently than Joseph, even if an angel had appeared to us in a dream. I am pretty sure that I would have. And so here, nestled within one of the most important stories of all time, we have one of the best pictures in the entire New Testament of godliness under fire. To put it another way, we have a great example of what it means to be a disciple. As we have seen over the last year, the gospel of Matthew is all about discipleship. We actually see here in Joseph a great example of the things Matthew has been telling us it means to be a disciple. So today, I want us to look at three characteristics of a disciple that Joseph excellently displays for us.

Three Characteristics of a Disciple

1. Joseph is righteous.

First, Joseph is righteous. Look again at verse 19:

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

The term just, or righteous here does not mean righteous as in the righteousness we are given in Christ, but simply that Joseph was upright in character and generally obedient and faithful to God's commands. Joseph was a man who wanted to do what was right, and the right thing to do in this situation would have been to separate himself from Mary's apparent sin. In fact, according to Jewish law the right thing to do in order to be pleasing to God would have been to divorce her. And if he didn't, he would have been admitting to guilt himself. So get this – Joseph didn't plan to divorce because he wanted to, but rather because he thought it was what God would want him to do. This is something we are going to see over and over again from Joseph. His priority, every time we see him in the Bible is to do what God wants him to do, regardless of the cost. And friends may the same thing be said for you and I. This, by the way, is the primary point of this message. A disciple does what God wants him to do, regardless of the cost.

In divorcing Mary, Joseph had two legal options. First, he could have made a public spectacle of her and asked that she be stoned. Although stoning in the case of adultery was rare in the first century, it is what the Mosaic Law called for. Far more likely, however, would be that she would be shamed publicly and forever labeled an adulteress, which would have completely ruined her life and the life of her child. And you can imagine that if you were in Joseph's shoes, this would probably seem like a pretty good option. If you had been cheated on, spurned, and humiliated, you would probably want revenge. And Joseph certainly could have gone down this route, all the while claiming that he was only doing what was just and right.

2. Joseph is loving.

However, this is where Joseph's second characteristic comes in. Joseph was righteous, but he was also loving. The text says that he resolved to divorce Mary quietly. This option would allow him to maintain his righteousness but at the same time be as gracious to Mary as possible. He could go through the legal procedure but do so with the minimum number of people involved, which would minimize the damage to Mary and her child.

And I think it's important to note that Joseph apparently struggled with this decision. It wasn't easy for him. But the struggle wasn't because he wanted revenge, but because he obviously loved Mary very much. Look at verse 20:

But as he considered these things...

You get the picture that despite Joseph's hurt and heartache he still loved Mary and wanted to make it work. So much that through tears and sleepless nights he is trying to figure out what is the best road to take. And then one night as he finally drifts off to sleep an angel appears and gives him the answer I believe he wanted all along.

You know, we don't normally think of the relationship between Joseph and Mary as a love story. Instead we kind of think of them as two people that God just stuck together to accomplish the birth of his Son. However, the story of Joseph and Mary is one of the great love stories of the Bible. In fact, someone should write a book or make a movie about it.

Listen, Joseph is facing the fact that his fiancé has not only cheated on him but is also crazy. We have to read between the lines here, but can you imagine the conversation that went down between the two of them. "Joseph, I'm pregnant, but it's not what you think. It wasn't another man, but the Holy Spirit." I don't know about you but the whole "the Holy Spirit did it to me" excuse wouldn't fly with me. But despite all of this, Joseph is looking for a way to make it work. He wants to believe her, as crazy and as hurtful as all of this is. He wants to work it out. He is praying for some way to keep her as his bride.

And in this I think we have a great example of what true love really is. Listen to me; Joseph shows us that love isn't a feeling, it isn't an emotion, and it isn't physical. Instead, it's a verb. It's a commitment. It's something we choose to do. In the words of 1 Corinthians 13, it's something that bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. Most of all it's something that never goes away, regardless of the circumstances.

3. Joseph is obedient.

Ok, so Joseph was righteous, Joseph was loving, but above all, Joseph was obedient.

Follow with me as I sketch out what we know of Joseph from Scripture.

When an angel tells him to take Mary as his wife even though he is not the father of her child, he does it.

When the angel tells him to name the baby Jesus, he does it.

When a little while later an angel tells him to flee to Egypt, he does it.

Shortly after that when an angel tells him to go home to Israel, he does it.

And finally when an angel tells him to get out of Bethlehem a second time, he does it. And he does all of this with apparently no questions asked. One of the most amazing things about Joseph is that there are no recorded words of his in Scripture. Not one! And while we can't learn anything from what he said, we can learn an incredible amount from what he did. And we can sum up what he did with this: he did whatever God told him to do. End of story.

Now, to help with this I'd like to get real practical with you here this morning, because I'm not so sure we are always clear about what ramifications true obedience has for how we live. It's pretty easy to give a nod that as God's children we are called to be obedient. I am pretty sure we would all agree that obedience is essential to the Christian life. The Bible is pretty clear about that. However, I'm not so sure we really understand what obedience requires. And here is where I think Joseph is extremely helpful because he gives us a great example of what obedience looks like in real life. Note with me three things he teaches us about obedience.

- **Obedience requires being mission-focused.**

One, obedience requires being mission-focused. Let's go back to our text for a moment. In verse 21 the angel tells Joseph very specifically that the child within Mary has a very special mission. You remember what it is right? The babies' mission is to save people from their sins. Get this. It's huge. From the moment Joseph hears this he does absolutely everything in his power to make sure this mission is not compromised in any way.

Think about it in terms of *Mission Impossible*. The angel says to Joseph, "Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to do everything you can to raise this baby so He can complete His mission of saving the world." I mean, we don't think of it is this way, but Joseph had quite a mission himself didn't he?

And so, he starts by taking Mary as his wife. He then takes a very pregnant Mary on a very long journey, likely walking all the way as he tended to her every need. He then probably ended up delivering Jesus himself – in a stable. There was no room in the inn and apparently no room in the hospital either. He then raced back and forth all over Egypt and Israel to protect Jesus from being murdered by Herod. And then eventually once things settled down he provided Jesus with a home and raised Him as his own son.

Now there is one more specific and poignant thing that Joseph does, or doesn't do here in our text. And it might not seem significant at first, but given our day and time I think it is helpful to consider. Look at verse 24-25 again:

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son.

Now, you understand what Matthew is telling us here verse 25, right? Joseph took Mary as his wife but didn't consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born. Why? Does the angel tell him not to? No. It's seems

that Joseph decided this on his own. And why? Because he didn't want to call into question the virgin birth. And so, for the sake of the mission, he practiced a great deal of self-control and remained celibate for perhaps a year longer than he had to. Now, I don't want to belabor the point, but I think this is particularly important for us to wrestle with. Joseph was not some old man who had lost all interest in sex. He was in his late teens, at a time when that's the primary thing most men think about. It's safe to say that he had the same desires as any normal young man. What's more, he was married and there wasn't anything sinful about doing so. In fact, the Bible would encourage him to do so. And yet for the sake of the mission he practiced incredible self-control and selflessness. You see, obedience for Joseph meant doing whatever he need to do to make sure that the mission of God's Son wasn't compromised in any way. And brothers and sisters, the same is true for us. We have the same mission that Joseph was given 2,000 years ago. We are called to do whatever we need to do to make sure the mission of God's Son isn't compromised in any way.

- **Obedience requires sacrifice.**

The second thing obedience requires is sacrifice. Joseph's decision to move forward with Mary cost him heavily. It cost him in the eyes of his community. There would have been whispers if not outright accusations of immorality. He would have been subjected to public humiliation. His reputation, which he treasured highly, would have been severely damaged.

He almost certainly endured financial hardship. He was poor before he got married and this situation didn't help out in the least. It's probable that he lost a lot of business because of it.

Most significantly, his obedience put his life in danger. If Herod had caught him on the way to and from Egypt it would have likely cost him his life.

So let's not be mistaken: obedience will lead to sacrifice. It can't be avoided. I don't think it's a stretch to say that if we aren't making sacrifices than we

probably aren't being obedient. We all have to answer that for ourselves, but here is where Jesus' example is so challenging. Philippians 2:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8, ESV)*

Did Jesus' obedience require sacrifice? You bet it did. His obedience cost him his life and in the process he secured our salvation. In turn, we have to ask what we are sacrificing in order to be obedient to him.

- **Obedience requires trusting God in the dark.**

The third thing obedience requires is trusting God in the dark.

When you really think about it, the events described here in Matthew 1 are nothing short of sensational. I imagine that Joseph's head must have been swimming. He couldn't have really understood what was going on, and he certainly didn't know what the future held. However, he didn't let his lack of knowledge or understanding immobilize him. God said to do something, and so he did it. He trusted in God's sovereignty, goodness, and wisdom, and in return God used him to change the world. What about you? Are you willing to step out in faith, not exactly sure where God is leading, and trust that He is going to use you to do great things?

As a conclusion to the message today, I'd like to read an extended passage from Max Lucado's book *He Still Moves Stones*. Lucado writes:

You've stood where Joseph stood. Caught between what God says and what makes sense. You've done what he told you to do only to wonder if it was him speaking in the first place. You've stared into a sky blackened with doubt. And you've asked what Joseph asked.

You've asked if you're still on the right road. You've asked if you were supposed to turn left when you turned right. And you've asked if there is a plan behind this scheme. Things haven't turned out like you thought they would.

Each of us knows what it's like to search the night for light. Not outside a stable, but perhaps outside an emergency room. On the gravel of a roadside. On the manicured grass of a cemetery. We've asked our questions. We questioned God's plan. And we've wondered why God does what he does.

The Bethlehem sky is not the first to hear the pleadings of a confused pilgrim. If you are asking what Joseph asked, let me urge you to do what Joseph did. Obey. That's what he did.

He obeyed. He obeyed when the angel called. He obeyed when Mary explained. He obeyed when God sent. He was obedient when the sky was bright. He was obedient when the sky was dark.

He didn't let his confusion disrupt his obedience. He didn't know everything. But he did what he knew. He shut down his business, packed up his family, and went to another country. Why? Because that's what God said to do.

What about you? Just like Joseph, you can't see the whole picture. Just like Joseph your task is to see that Jesus is brought into your part of your world. And just like Joseph you have a choice: to obey or disobey. Because Joseph obeyed, God used him to change the world.

Can he do the same with you?

God still looks for Josephs today. Men and women who believe that God is not through with this world. Common people who serve an uncommon God. Will you be that kind of person? Will you serve ... even when you don't understand?

No, the Bethlehem sky is not the first to hear the pleadings of an honest heart, nor the last. And perhaps God didn't answer every question for Joseph. But he

answered the most important one. "Are you still with me, God?" And through the first cries of the God-child the answer came.

"Yes. Yes, Joseph. I'm with you."

Joseph trusted God in the dark. He didn't know what the outcome would be, but he knew that God had spoken and so he decided to respond in faith. Brothers and sisters, that's how it often is for us. God doesn't always tell us what the outcome is going to be. He doesn't always show us exactly how things are going to turn out. But he has given us all we need to know. Maybe you have heard the old saying that there is "need to know and nice to know." God has given us all we need to know here in His Word. Yes, it would be nice to know how exactly things are going to work out, but all we really need to know He has told us right here. And He now wants us to step out in faith, just like Joseph, and obediently trust that He will provide what we need to do it.

In just a few days we will turn the calendar on 2013. Another year in the books. As we embark on a new year, many of you will probably make New Year's resolutions. I want to challenge you to make a resolution today to be a Joseph in 2014. To listen for God's voice and to obey what He calls you to do. To trust Him no matter what and just like Joseph, to allow Him to use you to change your world.

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