

What I learned about following Jesus from His (Step) Father

Matthew 1:18-2:23

December 4, 2005

Second Week in Advent

Last week we began this series of messages on learning about following Jesus from the Christmas story with a look at what we can learn from the experience of Mary that can teach us how to be better followers of Jesus. And if I had to sum up the lesson from Mary in one word, it would *availability*. She made herself available to God. At the critical moment of decision, she said yes to being used by God: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

The lessons we get from Joseph have some similarities, but Joseph is such a different person that how we get there is so different. You see, for Joseph son of Jacob, *Yosef bar Yacov*, life was all about disappointments. Joseph had it rough in life. Let me show you.

Let's start with the fact that Joseph, if the royal line of David had been in effect, would have been, and should have been the King of Israel. The genealogy in Matthew 1 demonstrates that. But the Davidic line was out of power. So the man that would have been king was a carpenter instead. *That's kind of a let down.*

Then we have the whole untold story of the relocation of Joseph. Joseph evidently was from the old hometown of David, Bethlehem. Evidently, at some point he inherited some land there—that's why he and Mary had to go there for taxation purposes. As far as the Roman government was concerned, he was a resident of Bethlehem, and had to take care of business there.

So how did Joseph end up way up north, 80 miles away in Nazareth? This was in a time and in which most people never traveled farther than 30 miles from their place of birth. The short answer is, we don't know. Was there a family feud? Maybe. The most likely answer is that Joseph moved for the same reason that people today move: for the work. The time does fit what the Romans were doing, which some major building projects in Galilee, including, during Jesus' childhood, a practically new town a few miles away from Nazareth, a place called Sepphoris.

A little side note on the term "carpenter." That word included construction, masonry work, and so forth. And it wasn't a compliment. People who did work like that were considered pretty close the bottom of the professional pecking order. Kind of like the guys waiting for a day labor job over at the parking lot at Home Depot.

So—life had handed Joseph a lot of lemons. But among the lemons, he found his rose. A sweetheart of a girl named Mary—*Mariam* is the way he would have thought of her.

He went to Mary's parents, according to the customs of the time, and asked them for their daughter's hand. This workingman must have impressed them as a man of faith and character, and they consented.

Now here's where a little background will come in handy. You didn't just "announce your engagement" in those days. You had a *betrothal* ceremony. Parents living nearby, a few friends, usually a rabbi would be present as the couple promised marriage to one another. From that day on, they would refer to each other as "husband" and "wife", but they would not live with each other until the

wedding itself, which would be set for a few months off. This was so binding that breaking a betrothal was considered a kind of divorce. You didn't just send the ring back and cancel the cake. It was a really big, serious deal.

That's when the lemon pattern of Joseph's life seemed to reassert itself.

Look at Matthew 1:18-19:

18This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

It's tempting to go for laughs here and describe the scene where Mary tells Joseph that she'd pregnant and that Almighty God is the Father as a kind of comedy. It sure didn't seem like comedy to Joseph. It seemed a whole lot more like tragedy. Another slice of lemon pie.

Do you ever get the feeling that your whole life is a play written by an author who really doesn't like you? That was Joseph's experience. Instead of being a king, he was a working stiff. Instead of the old hometown, he was off slumming it in Galilee. And now, just when it looked like he was finally getting it together, his sweet bride-to-be gets pregnant or crazy or both.

Imagine the heartbreak of Joseph. No doubt part of him wanted to believe her, but it was just too wacko. You're pregnant and *God* is the father? No, this was not possible. Nor was her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. It's getting

harder and harder for 21st century Americans to understand how deeply wounded Joseph felt—and how, as a “righteous man” he felt he must act. He has two alternatives: to either *sue her for divorce* or to simply *hand her a notice of divorce*. He had no desire to rake Mary over the coals. So he decided on the latter course. It was the lesser of two evils.

But then—God stepped in. That’s always the turning point. Let me ask you a question. Are you in a life situation where you’re waiting for the “But then God...” moment?

You know what the “But then God...” moment is, don’t you? A missionary goes to the field. Nothing works right. He has nothing to show for his labor. *But then God* opens a door. Everything changes. God, in a special way, shows up.

A woman is raising her kids as a single mom. There is crisis after crisis. There’s no money. There’s nothing but aloneness. *But then God* changes things. There is a turn-around. A new door is opened. Transformation comes as God makes Himself known in power.

A young man is a college student. He’s full of the anti-Christian opinions that his professors pump into him. But a friend, or a change of circumstances, or a tragic event gives him his own *but then God* moment. Suddenly what seemed so irrational makes sense. His eyes are opened. God becomes real to this man.

This was Joseph’s moment. God showed up—and things change.

Look at Matthew 1:20-21:

20But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

I want to give you three big ideas that anyone, but especially, any follower of Jesus can take from the experience of Joseph and take right into their own lives.

1. Be prepared for rude interruptions
2. Don't discount the miraculous
3. Be prepared for sudden course corrections

Be prepared for rude interruptions

One thing we learn from Joseph's life is that you needed to be prepared for rude interruptions. So far, Joseph's life had been nothing but rude interruptions.

Maybe we get our brains trained by TV, the idea that all problems can be resolved in 60 minutes, with time for commercial breaks. Real life is difficult. A lot of us were born in trouble, live and trouble, and will die in trouble. That's real life.

But even yet, we usually form an idea of the path of our lives that doesn't include setbacks. One of the things I do with engaged couples is an exercise in which we talk about the inevitable setbacks that we encounter. It's an exercise in reality that usually opens eyes.

The whole "Joseph, I'm pregnant, and God is the daddy" experience is kind of an ultimate rude interruption. It was a body slam straight from the WWF. But then God shows up and confirms it. It's true!

Isn't that the way God often does things? God has an agenda, a plan, and He feels no

obligation to check your calendar to see if it's OK with you.

And when these zingers come, it's always unwanted, unexpected and unanticipated. Yet it's the best thing in the world. But it *never* feels like that at the time. That's the way it works, and all we can do is **be prepared, as best we can, for rude interruptions.**

Second, we learn from the experience of Joseph:

Don't discount the miraculous

One thing I've learned is that all Christians believe in God's miraculous intervention—*in theory*. But in practice? That's another matter.

Matthew tells the birth of Jesus from Joseph's point of view, even as Luke tells the story from Mary's. From Matthew 1:18-2:23, there are no less than six miracles. There is the virgin conception of Jesus, a miraculous vision of a star and four God-given dreams (three to Joseph, one to the Magi).

It's interesting that both Josephs—the Old Testament Joseph, the boy who became the viceroy of Egypt, and this New Testament Joseph—are dreamers. At the risk of making them both look bad, generally dreams are the way God gets through to the most spiritually dense. I mean, Mary has a vision, not a dream. And many times, God speaks to pagans through dreams—people like the Pharaoh of Egypt or the King of Babylon, or these Magi, also from old Babylon.

But that's a side issue. Here's the nub: don't we, despite our words otherwise, tend to doubt anything that borders on the miraculous? And how much does that make sense, for people

who are followers of a Savior who healed the sick and raised the dead?

One thing to learn from Joseph is this: don't discount the fact that the living God can and will speak through mere people, and that He will do things that are just beyond the realm of the natural, cause and effect world that we are used to.

My mentor, J. Christy Wilson, firmly believed in the miraculous works of God. He observed that there are **two conditions** to seeing God work miraculously: **first**, you have to *believe that it's possible*. If you never expect God to do supernatural, beyond the natural kinds of things, then guess what? He doesn't! That jives with what Mark 5:6-7, where we're told that a lack of faith inhibited even Jesus' ability—or His willingness—to do miracles in His hometown of Nazareth.

The **second** condition seeing God work miraculously is to be *passionately involved in God's will and work*. God intervenes supernaturally when something vital to His plan is on the line. And if you're not at the cutting edge of the will of God, if you're off somewhere wandering, then you won't see God at work.

Have I been involved in some things that were miraculous? Yes. Am I going to list 'em off now? No. I feel just like Paul here, the way he writes in 2 Corinthians, where he says, I'm not getting into this because it would look like boasting.

Folks, learn from Joseph: don't discount the miraculous.

Be prepared for sudden course corrections

Now, I mean something a little different from the "rude interruption" by a "sudden course correction." A rude interruption is more when God shows up unexpectedly. A sudden course correction is when we really are seeking God and are in the heart of His will, but a change must come. Think again of Joseph's story.

For a while, things moved in a nice straight line: he accepted Mary as his wife, and as the virgin mother of the Messiah, then they have Jesus in Bethlehem, and then the Magi come. OK, that's good, that's all "up." Treasures of gold and of incense and of myrrh aren't bad either! Then came a sudden course correction.

Joseph and Mary were right in the center of God's will, and yet they had to make a sudden change. They'd been gotten cozy there in Bethlehem. After all, it was Joseph's hometown. They'd probably been there two years. And living there solved any lingering rumors about the legitimacy of Jesus' birth.

But now, another dream came. See Matthew 2:13-15:

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

God guided them to Bethlehem. And now God told them to get out of there. And God wasn't schizoid. Things changed, and Herod was an immediate threat, so they got out of there and ran off to Egypt until Herod's death.

What's the lesson for us? It's this: when God breaks in and changes things, it's not because we're in sin or that He's disciplining us. It's because a change is needed to stay on the cutting edge of the will of God, and to bring God the maximum glory.

Joseph had lessons to learn. Kind of like us. And he learned them. God was pleased to have Joseph be the earthly father, the step father you might say, of His Son.

And Jesus learned these lessons too. He learned that the life that His heavenly Father called Him too wasn't a life of obeying rules, but a life of pleasing the Father, and loving the Father, and wanting to do His will above all else.

Joseph slips quietly out of the gospel story. He is there for Jesus' birth, and when Jesus got left behind at the temple when He was 12, but after that, poof, Joseph is gone. We can only guess that sometime between when Jesus was 12 and the beginning of His ministry, at about age 32, somewhere in that 20 year span, Joseph died.

And what we can say about him is the best thing we can have anyone say after us when we die:

He did the will of God and was found faithful.

Amen?

PRAYER