

“Christmas Carols II: Joseph’s Song”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Matthew 1:18-25

Once there was a man, a good and kind man, and his name was Joseph. He was a carpenter by trade, and he was from a good family. He had everything going for him - a home, a career - everything except a wife. But then he became engaged, probably in the way that most people became engaged in that day and time - it was an arranged marriage - arranged by the parents of the prospective bride and the man who would be her husband. A deal was struck, dowry was paid, there would be an engagement for a period of a year, and then marriage.

Well, Joseph must have been very happy to become engaged to young Mary. He was everything a man would want in a wife. Young, innocent, full of hopes and dreams for the future. Everything was looking good. Undoubtedly, the whole community was happy for the both of them. Surely, plans were being made for their home, the wedding, the future. Surely, lots of people were involved in all of that.

And then, disaster struck! Joseph’s beloved fiancée, young, dear Mary, came to him and told him the heartbreaking news - that she was pregnant - heartbreaking because Joseph knew it wasn’t his child, and because he knew that

meant that she had betrayed him.

Joseph could have done anything at that moment. He could have blown up, pitched a fit and discarded Mary. He could have run out the door and spread the word of her infidelity and pregnancy. He could have taken her to court and they might have ordered her stoned - that happened in that day and time. He could have paraded her in front of her parents, his parents, anybody and portrayed her as a scarlet woman. He could have done any of those things, and people would have probably understood. From all outward appearances, she had been unfaithful to him and he could react anyway he wanted.

The first clue we have that Joseph is not just anybody is when he makes the decision to handle the situation quietly and without any kind of public fanfare. The scripture says that he decided to dismiss her quietly. In other words, he would go to her father, dissolve the engagement, and that would be that. He didn't even really need to tell her father why. It would just be done. And that's what he was going to do. He didn't need to disgrace Mary, for perhaps he knew how disgraced she might have already been feeling herself. He didn't need to humiliate her, because he knew the humiliation that lay ahead for her. He didn't need to make himself look better, by making her look bad. He was a good and just and righteous man, and he was just going to take care of it quietly.

At least that's what he was going to do - before he laid his head down on his pillow one night, and during the night an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and changed everything. The angel reassured him that God was a part of this whole thing, that it was the Holy Spirit who came upon Mary, that this was to be a Son, and not just a Son, but the very Son of God, who would come to save God's people." And thanks be to God, Joseph listened to that angel, and believed that angel, and woke from sleep, and changed the course he was about to take. He stood by Mary through it all, and became a partner with her and God in the greatest miracle ever in all the world.

Someone that said that isn't it amazing that this first story about Jesus' birth is such a story of grace? Joseph standing by Mary when by all rights he didn't have to. Joseph taking on her suffering and humiliation, and making it his own. Joseph bearing her burden, Joseph standing up for the lowly and hurting - story of amazing grace. What an amazing way for the Gospel story - a story of such amazing grace itself - what an amazing way for it to begin - than with a story of such profound grace on the part of a man named Joseph.

Well, we all know how the rest of the story goes, and we'll hear more about it in the weeks ahead. What I want us to stop and consider now for a few moments

together, is what Joseph's story, his song, if you will, has to say to us when we face challenging or even heart-breaking moments in our own lives?

The first thing that I think Joseph's story tells us is to trust your gut - trust in what you feel God is saying to you. Now admittedly, God might not appear to you in a dream, or send an angel to visit you, but God does get His will across to you in some way. Sometimes, it might come through the words of another person, it might come through a passage of scripture, or words in a sermon or a hymn, sometimes it might come in something you see, and sometimes it's just a feeling in your gut. You know what you know that you know.

Trust that feeling. Do what God compels you to do, even if it's not what the world would expect you to do or allow you to do. Do the right thing, even when it's hard. Do the right thing, especially if it's the grace-filled thing to do.

That's what Joseph did. He listened to that angel, he listened to God, he didn't turn his back on his young and vulnerable fiancée when he absolutely, positively had every right to do so. Instead, he hung in there with her and made a life with her, bringing God's dream to reality. It was absolutely, positively the hardest choice he ever had to make, and most probably, the hardest thing he ever had to do, but he chose to listen to God, and did it anyway. In the words of one pastor, "he risked his reputation, and took responsibility." (On-line, Rev. Laura

Collins) I believe his story compels us to do likewise.

The second thing I think Joseph's story compels us to do actually came to me by way of a wonderful sermon I read this week by the Rev. Samuel Candler. It was entitled "Believe in the Dreams of the Person You Love." Isn't that a great sermon title? Well, it was an equally great sermon, in which he talked about just that.

He said this: "The greatest gift you can give this year is to believe in someone's dreams. The greatest gift you can give is to have faith in someone else; believe in their dreams. Believe in the dreams of the person you love." (On-line, "Believe in the Dreams of the Person You Love," Rev. Samuel Candler)

I just love that, and that is exactly what Joseph did. He believed in Mary's dream, a dream sent from God. And he not only believed in it, but he lived into it with her. What a great gift he gave her - and what a great gift we can give to those we love - believing in them!

Too many times, we squelch dreams, we bring reality into play and squelch dreams. We tell people why they can't do something, that it's not practical, or it can't be done, or what will people think, or it's too much trouble, it will never happen. And we especially do that when it will impact us.

Oh, but the gospel message, and surely the message of Joseph's story is the opposite of that - it's a message of love and support and dreaming dreams and seeing visions. It may not have made sense to Joseph, and he probably for the life of him, couldn't see how it would possibly work out, but he "believed in the dreams of his dear Mary" and stood right by her side for the whole adventure.

What an invitation for each of us to embrace - to believe in the dreams of the person you love.

Finally, not only did Joseph trust his gut to do the right thing, and believe in the dreams of his Mary, ultimately the thing that carried Joseph through it all, was that he trusted that he was not alone in it - God was right there by his side.

Someone has said that when Joseph "was in the midst of that awful decision-making, when it felt like he was choosing one kind of hell over another, God stepped in and said, 'I know this looks like hell and feels like hell and hurts like hell, but believe it or not, I'm going to bring something heavenly out of it. Can you trust me about this?'" (On-line, Rev. Laura Collins)

Joseph did, he trusted God, and more than that, he trusted that God would

be with him through it all. It's the only way he could do what he did, and endure what he had to endure. And my friends, it's the only way we can ever do what we are called to do in our lives, by throwing ourselves on God's grace and trusting in His never-ending presence and power in our lives.

What a fabulous story is Joseph's, isn't it? What an example for us when life throws curve balls our way, when life breaks our heart, or causes our backs to bend over nearly to the point of breaking. Remember Joseph's story, his song, and when those things happen, first - trust your gut and what you know in your heart God is saying to you and calling you to do; secondly - believe in your dreams and the dreams of those you love; and finally - know deep in your heart that you are never, ever alone, no matter what. The God of Mary and Joseph, the God of the baby born in Bethlehem - that very same God, walks with you every single step of the way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.