

**PERSPECTIVES:
UNPLANNED PARENTHOOD (JOSEPH)
MATTHEW 1:18-25
DECEMBER 23, 2012**

There are many different angles from which to experience the birth of a child into a family.

Each family position provides a different angle.

Mother experiences the pregnancy and is often the primary caregiver and food source for a while.

So she has her own unique experience.

Grandparents await the birth with great anticipation.

They are ready to spoil the child,

and then give it back to parents,

exacting the traditional grandparents' revenge.

Siblings may become jealous,

because they have to share Mom and Dad or share a bedroom.

Or they might try to become the "junior parent."

Or, at certain ages they may be so wrapped up in their own stuff,

they don't really take much note of the new little one at all.

Friends of the parents may be very excited.

And some of them will tell those horribly inappropriate stories of

people they know who had problems with pregnancy,

complications in delivery, and worse,

planting nightmares in the minds of the pregnant parents.

Then there is the father.

He's not the one carrying the baby, birthing the baby, or nursing the baby.

He wants to help,

but especially the first time around he has no idea what to do... or not do.

He may be at loose ends,

feeling as out of place as a fifth wheel on a car.

He may also feel jealous that all of his wife's attention and energy is going to the baby.

But you can't admit that out loud because... well it's a baby.

This morning we're going to consider a father's perspective,

that of Joseph as he faced the coming birth of Jesus.

This was not a pregnancy or a baby he'd been planning on.

MATTHEW 1:18-19

Imagine Joseph's initial reaction.

"You're WHAT?"

There must have been shock, hurt, betrayal.

We only get the tiniest hint of it in the biblical text.

He planned to divorce her quietly.

They were more than engaged;

they were betrothed.

But there were no conjugal rights.

Betrothal was a legally binding arrangement

that is more formal and official than engagement.

So it required a divorce to dissolve it.

Given her apparent sexual unfaithfulness,

considered adultery if you were betrothed,

Old Testament law said he could have had her stoned to death.

(Dt.22:23-27; Le.20:10)

But Joseph was a good man.

He didn't want to seek vengeance on her or even shame her.

So he planned a quiet, quick divorce.

But imagine his thoughts and feelings that must have been behind the text.

"I can't believe she would do this to me.

I waited for her. I saved myself for her. But she...

I thought she loved me.

Who's the guy?

She told me some cockamamie story about an angel and the Spirit of God.

Who's the guy?

I'll take him apart.

But, no, it's not his fault as much as it is hers.

I can't marry her now.

How could I ever trust her again?"

Betrayal of trust is probably the most difficult things to overcome in a relationship.

And sexual betrayal of the marriage covenant is usually a deal breaker.

Trust has been broken in a big way.

And trust broken cannot simply be given again.

It has to be earned.

Earned over a long period of time.

Add to that the emotional turmoil,

the images that come into the mind,

the unanswered questions,

and it's agonizing.

That's why the Bible points to adultery, sexual unfaithfulness,

as the one clear circumstance in which God allows divorce.

(Dt.24:1)

Joseph had to be terribly shocked and hurt.

And now he had to figure out what to do.

Interestingly, deciding what to do with someone guilty of adultery

was something Jesus himself would face.

A woman caught in adultery was brought before him,

and the law and order crowd asked him what they ought to do.

They knew the law said to stone her.

They knew Jesus had a habit of going easy on sin and hanging out with sinners.

This was their chance to catch him blatantly breaking the law of God.

Jesus bent down,

wrote with his finger in the sand, we don't know what, and said,

"Whoever is without sin may cast the first stone."

One by one they dropped the rocks in their hands,

grumbled a bit,

and walked away.

I wonder if Jesus thought of the suspicion about his own mother and her pregnancy.

Jesus did not condone the sin of adultery as if it was unimportant.

He said, "I don't condemn you either.

Go and sin no more."

(Jn.8:3-11)

Joseph wasn't quite Jesus.

But he did show a measure of grace in deciding to quietly divorce Mary,

rather than publicly shame or punish her.

But, Matthew says, that night an angel came to him in a dream.

MATTHEW 1:20-25

The angel delivers a message.

First, don't be afraid to take her as your wife.

Don't be afraid.

Did you know the Bible says that 365 times?

Once for every day of the year.

Whenever the Bible says, "Don't be afraid,"

it's almost always because of the presence and activity of God.

Don't be afraid,

because God is here and God is at work.

Then the angel explains Mary's pregnancy.

Mary might have tried to explain it to Joseph,

but who's going to believe that coming from the one who is pregnant?

Years ago I served as a part-time chaplain at the Methodist Mission Home,

where unwed girls were living before giving up their babies for adoption.

And among those girls

the whole virgin birth thing was something of a running joke.

But Joseph got the word from an angel.

The child is God's child.

And you shall name him.

By naming him, Joseph would have been effectively adopting the child as his own,

and thereby adopting him into his family line,

which was also the line of King David.

The family line from which the messiah was expected to come.

Jesus would become the son of David by adoption,

just as we can become sons and daughters of God by adoption.

The angel said to name him Jesus, Yeshua in Hebrew.

Jesus was a fairly common name, a form of the name Joshua.

It means "God saves."

He will save his people from their sins.

Matthew then gives a little side note about Jesus being considered Immanuel,

which means "God with us."

The very presence of God in the flesh,

not just in the mighty Jesus who stills the storm with a spoken command,

but also in the tiny, helpless baby in the manger...

and the man hanging helpless on a cross.

Again, the biblical account is quite brief, and gives us no information about Joseph's initial thoughts and feelings.

So we have to fill in the blanks with imagination.

I imagine his first thoughts as skeptical, even with a message from an angel.

She's a pregnant virgin?

Riiiiight.

I took sex education.

I know better.

But we know that he quickly came to believe.

Somehow he was convinced of the reality of the situation.

He took sex education,

but the God who created sex in the first place was at work here.

I have to ask, at this point:

Have you brought your doubts and questions to God?
 Have you been open and honest and truly sought answers and reassurance?
 Some people have serious questions about things like
 the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus
 and the whole realm of miracles.
 And there's the age-old problem of evil and suffering.
 If God is all good, all knowing, and all powerful,
 why is there evil in the world?
 Sometimes it's an intellectual problem,
 and sometimes it's an existential problem,
 like when 20 first graders were senselessly murdered
 a week ago in Connecticut.
 Sometime evil is not an abstract concept,
 but real and close to home.

We have questions, questions, questions.
 So many things we do not understand.
 And too many questions unanswered can sometimes distance us from God.
 Have you been open and honest, and truly sought *answers* to your questions?
 Are you reading books that offer answers?
 Do you seek God in prayer?
 Are in you involved in a Sunday school or Bible study
 so you can learn from Scripture and the insights of others?
 What are you doing to find answers to your questions and reassurance for your doubts?
 Joseph was certainly as skeptical as anyone about the origins of this child.
 Who ever heard of a real virgin birth?
 But he was open to what God might show him to be true.
 What God *did* show him to be true.
 Are your questions and doubts held firmly to keep God at a safe distance?
 Or are you truly open to receiving answers and understanding?
 Follow the example of Joseph.
 He received an answer from God,
 and so he was persuaded and believed.

I wonder if he then thought,

“Raise the Son of God as my own child?
 I can't do this. I'm not up to it.
 I'm not sure about how I'd do raising any baby at all.
 But raising the savior? Raising Immanuel, God with us?
 I'm inadequate to that task.”

I wonder if he considered,

Mary knows the truth, and I know the truth.
 But who else is going to believe it?
 They'll all be whispering about Mary's past.
 They'll wonder why I was willing to marry her anyway.
 They might call our son the most unsavory of words.
 There could be some seriously unpleasant moments come from this.
 As a side note, the means for an abortion were available then,
 but it's never mentioned in the story,
 as if it was never considered.

It's one thing to be convinced of the truth and to hear God's call.
 It's something else to actually step out and answer that God.
 But eventually Joseph responded with obedience,
 ready and willing to pay the price,
 trusting God as he headed into an unknown future,
 agreeing to be a servant of God in his saving work in the world.
 And God was able to use Josephs' willing obedience behind the scenes,
 in so many episodes of parenting that are not told in Scripture.
 This man who encountered an unplanned pregnancy became Jesus' adoptive father.
 He left his mark on the life of the baby, the boy, the man.
 And we got Jesus, God saves,
 Immanuel, God with us.

Are you willing to serve God in obedience even when you don't understand?
 Are you willing to serve God even when you feel inadequate to the task?
 Would you be willing to serve God even if you knew it would be costly to do so?
 It's really a question of faith.

As William Barclay wrote,
 "Faith is not only a commitment to the promises of Christ;
 faith is also a commitment to the demands of Christ."
 Faith is a commitment to the *demands* of Christ.

That faith is like a muscle.

It has to be exercised.
 And if we'll exercise it in the small things,
 we'll be better equipped to be obedient in bigger things.
 Let me share a story of faith being exercised on Halloween night.
 A bunch of us hosted a Trunk-or-Treat at Galm Elementary School
 to promote Pathway Fellowship to the community.
 One of the parents involved wrote me an email to tell about what her children did that night:
 "While everyone was setting up, and before people really started showing up,
 my husband took our 3 boys around the neighborhood to do a traditional 'trick or treat.'
 They collected their buckets of candy and put them in the front of our truck.
 As the night went on, and hundreds of children came to the Trunk-or-Treating,
 we ran out of candy and borrowed from the donated "stash".
 My older boys were handing out the candy and were so excited to see people keep coming!
 Finally it was almost time to go and we still had a line of children standing at our trunk...
 and we were out of candy.
 Our seven year old son went to the front of the truck.
 He got his bucket of candy that he collected from the neighborhood,
 and started passing it out to the trick-or-treaters.
 Our ten year old son then ran to the front
 and got his bucket and started doing the same thing.
 Before it was all said and done, they had no candy of their own.
 But you never would have known it.
 They were smiling from ear to ear.
 Happier than I've ever seen them on Halloween.
 As Christian parents we do our best to teach our boys good values and principles every day.
 Be polite, be honest, be kind, be thoughtful, be forgiving,
 be generous, follow the 'golden rule.'
 I guess as with any parent, we always wonder how much of it sinks in.
 Who knew that this Halloween they would teach US a lesson?
 I thought to myself,
 'They are Christians, too.'

Of COURSE they care for those kids.
Of COURSE they want to be kind and generous.
Christ lives in their hearts, just as He lives in mine.”

Those kids exercised their faith, their obedience to the call of Christ.

They were willing to give generously,
even though it cost them something.
Seven and ten years old.

If they keep exercising that faith,
they could be used by God in wonderful ways.
Just like a man named Joseph.
Just like you.
Right?

Scriptures cited: Dt.22:23-27; Le.20:10; Dt.24:1; Jn.8:3-11