

Scriptures: Isaiah 7:10-16

7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,

7:11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

7:12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.

7:13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

7:15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

7:16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1:18-25

1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

1:19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

1:20 But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet (Isaiah):

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Proclamation of the Word

In honor of Joseph, I would like to declare today Father's Day. I am aware that it is December. We are nowhere close to June or Fathers Day. We know that Mary gets most of the press. She has been depicted in art and sculpture throughout the ages. She has her own song in Luke's gospel. She has an annunciation from an Angel of the Lord. But today, today it's all about Joseph and his encounter with the holiness of God. But poor Joseph is in a bit of a pickle, a dilemma about what to do about this issue of Mary being pregnant.

II. We do know that Joseph is a righteous man.

Joseph's problem is not just personal. He is in legal hot water! Scripture says Joseph is RIGHTEOUS. Being righteous means "law-abiding" according to the law of Moses for this Jewish Joseph. I am not a lawyer, although I live with a couple of young whipper snappers who like to negotiate and argue their case. So I consulted a lawyer and a scholar on this one. Dr. Bill Long has this to say about the righteous Joseph.

"It looks like if he *really* is righteous that Joseph has to bring the woman to her father's house and have her stoned to death. **The passage doesn't give, as we say in law, a "safe harbor" by appealing to a "Holy Spirit exception."** That is, there is no "footnote" in the text which says, "This law applies unless conclusive or persuasive evidence can be brought that the pregnancy is the result of direct divine intervention."

Could you imagine if such an exception *was* placed in the law? The "Holy Spirit defense" would become the major vehicle used by young Jewish women who had been playing around and wanted to keep from being killed. A whole jurisprudence on the "Holy Spirit defense" would have grown up in Israel... But, unfortunately, the text doesn't give Joseph and Mary this "out." **So, it looks as if Joseph then is an *unrighteous* man in deciding to get rid of his wife quietly. But how can he, who was just deemed *righteous*, apparently in the next breath, decide *not* to follow the law?"**

<http://www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIII/Matt1II.html>

A righteous Jewish man would have had her stoned to death....but righteousness is redefined ...he is faithful and righteous in ways that challenge his tradition. Joseph is a man who has discerned God's will even if it appears to conflict with the letter of the Law. So how did this law-abiding man have a change of heart?

III. Redirected Righteousness- the Holy Spirit is working

This is a case of Redirected Righteousness and the work of the Holy Spirit. Specifically, JUST when Joseph had made up his mind, the angel of God speaks.

He had struggled with what to do. Pacing around his carpenter shop all day, fretting upon the stage of life's strange dilemmas, he could not think. He had hammered his own thumb twice, something he never did. He was distracted and distraught. This Mary whom he loved and was legally bound had totally messed up. She was pregnant with what appeared to be another man's child. He knew what the law required, but he was not willing to have Mary stoned to death. He being a just man was willing to conspire against the law of the day, to do the truly Right thing by Mary, his fiance. He would send her away quietly divorcing her and resolve to move on. He decided not to stigmatize her (*digmatize deigmatizo* in Greek). It is at this moment of resolution that God intervenes. Just when Joseph has a plan, the Holy Spirit leads in a different direction.

Sometimes just when we have made up our minds, a messenger of God may also try to break through to us. God through the power of the Holy Spirit is still speaking. We might have things all figured out and then the Holy Spirit goes to work.

Have you had your mind made up and then your faith is called into question? Have you had things which are part of your faith tradition challenged? Have you prayerfully discerned with resolve to do a new thing with a new understanding? That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is a journey, a process. As my faith has grown and changed over the years. Things I believed once have been redirected by the Holy Spirit through study, prayer and the influence of faithful Christians. As reformed Christians who base our faith on the Bible, we can be tempted to make an idol of the Bible and not be open to the God of the Bible just as Joseph struggled with the letter of the law. Case in point, the Old Testament forbids eating shrimp and shellfish, but I have weighed that in light of God's revelation in Jesus and understanding and knowledge of the socio-economic culture. I love a good shrimp cocktail and do not think it unfaithful to eat it! The Bible talks of selling a thief into slavery if he cannot make restitution and stoning an adulterous woman- left out the men for some reason. Discernment is most important for Christian living ...prayer, study, and reflection with the community of faith. God is still speaking through the Holy Spirit. And Christians must faithfully discern together God's will.

IV. Moves beyond his own Fear- Courage

Joseph listens to the angel, God's messenger. Throughout the Bible when people are met by an angel, the first words the angels proclaim is "Fear not, be not afraid." But this angel speaks says do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. In taking the pregnant Mary as his wife, he joins her in her stigma. He takes the risk to do what is righteous, just, and God's will. In fact, we who know the story of the birth of Jesus, know that later Jesus is under threat of murder by King Herod. His birth caused a political stir that would drive Mary and Joseph into hiding way down to Egypt. Joseph not only redefines righteousness and justice, he shows incredible courage. He goes against the Law of the faith and of the land.

He listens to the angel of the Lord.

He had laid his head down to sleep with resolves to dismiss Mary quietly, then this troubling dream revealed a new plan. I bet he had trouble going to sleep after the angel of the Lord appeared. What lay ahead for Joseph and Mary was daunting as can be for any parent willing to take responsibility for a child. I can imagine him tossing and turning as he wondered about the future.

What a restless night that must have been for Joseph.

But in that restlessness came redemption...and his a name is Jesus.

A baby literally named "Saves" is born through two fearful and brave human beings.

A baby named "Saves" came to show in human vulnerability, the way, the truth and the life.

In this nursing, crying, diaper wet baby, the Kingship of God is revealed.

Joseph saw an injustice and tried to make it right. I for one am grateful that Joseph resolved to do the only righteous thing...to adopt as his own son, God's baby boy.

Joseph was the one God chose to wipe the nose of the baby named "Saves."

He was the one who went to his bed when Jesus had bad dreams, or shielded him when other kids made fun of him.

It was Joseph who mentored the boy as a good Jew and a young man of faith.

It was Joseph who had the privilege to teach him to use an awl and a plane to build a sturdy table and a comfortable chair.

It was Joseph who had the joy of being the guardian of God's boy while he grew in wisdom and stature and faith.

Joseph adopted Jesus as his own child and took full responsibility for God's boy.

What a wonderfully faithful father under whose roof the savior of the world was raised!

Thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit who makes us restless so that Redemption, "God Saves," Jesus can be born among us!

But God the Father of Jesus, reminds us that Joseph and Mary were never alone.

"God with us," *Emmanuel* is a sign of God's abiding Spirit. In the same way that Matthew's gospel begins with God with Us in today's lesson, Jesus ends with

"I am with you always even to the end of the age so...go share the good news and make disciples."

V. A World Full of Josephs

We have a world full of Josephs, faithful and righteous people who have adopted others for the sake of their well-being. There is an **Anglican priest named Father Dave** who lives in Australia. He is a former boxer who mentors young people living in poverty or on the streets of his town. He has three children, but is called to be a father to the father-less or under-fathered young people in his community. I stumbled on his website this week. He head an order of the priesthood called the Order of the Fighting Fathers. The purpose is clear from the message:

"We are an order of fighting priests and lay people, committed to Fighting the Good Fight against drugs, poverty, prejudice, and all forms of injustice." <http://www.igroops.com/members/fightingfathers>

Now that is a fight worth waging, sharing the gospel and working with young people!

Perhaps you have heard of the "**Call me Mister**" Initiative at Clemson University whose mission is to encourage diverse young men and women to mentor and teach so that the most vulnerable youth can have role models and good teachers.

In a week where UNICEF just released a report that showed of the top 20 richest nations, the United States is one of the lowest scores in its care and treatment of the poorest and most vulnerable children, such an initiative is good news!

As a young person, I was fathered and mothered by an extended family called the church. There were fathers to praise me when I did something right or to tell me not to climb over the balcony railing so I might not get hurt. I had fathers (and mothers) named Joe, Ralph and Perk to teach me Sunday School. They led the way of

loading presents and groceries when it was time at Christmas to deliver the Angel gifts demonstrating Christian generosity. They were the elders who administered the Iva Barnwell Scholarship so that I might have financial help in going to college. And with me always, there was my mother and big brothers who had to play that role of father. They all provided for me and taught me how to check the oil, balance a checkbook, and how to love the Lord and the Lord's church.

I am thankful that the church can be a place full of Josephs teaching and demonstrating good news!

Even as we give thanks for fathers like Joseph and celebrate Father's Day, I ask are you open to ways that God is calling you to be that fathering presence in the lives of others? What are you willing to do for the sake of God's redemptive work in the world might be born through you? Through us?

May the Holy Spirit guide and direct us all to be a part of the restless redemption of God.

Charge and Benediction:

The God who was born to Mary and Joseph is with us, Emmanuel. Jesus sends us out saying I am with you always even to the end...so go forth knowing that it is God who sends you and wherever you are, God is with you. He sends us forward with a purpose: to share the good news until all know and can Rest in God's amazing Redemption.

Go in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!

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