

# Hopkins South Monterey

## United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

December 11, 2022

Pastor Kelsey

Matthew 1:18-25    NRSV

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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

## Prayers & Sermon

*Holy God,*

*scripture tells us that you came to Joseph through an angel—  
loud and clear, impossible to miss.*

*Scripture also tells us that Joseph listened.*

*He rearranged his life to follow your invitation.*

*God, we long for that—*

*all of that.*

*We long to hear your voice—loud and clear, impossible to miss.*

*We long for invitations to something more, something deeper.*

*And we long to be like Joseph and find the courage to follow.*

*So clean out our ears. Brush the dust off our hearts.*

*Trace us back to our roots—back to Joseph—who heard and followed.*

*With gratitude we listen.*

*Amen.*

Last week we looked at the story of The Annunciation, how Mary was told by the Angel Gabriel that she would give birth to God's Son, Jesus. Today, we switch to the Gospel of Matthew that doesn't tell us of Mary finding out, but does give us Joseph's side of the story. I can't tell you why the book of Matthew doesn't tell us about Mary's reaction, but we probably hear about Joseph's side because it tells us why Jesus counts as Joseph's son after we were given the 17 verses full of 42 generations of names of Jesus's genealogy through Joseph's line. Perhaps this part of the story is given to give a short explanation that although Jesus may not be Joseph's biologically, he would be raised as Joseph's adopted son—though Mary did not seem to get a whole lot of choice in being Jesus's mom, Joseph had a choice. Joseph could have quietly ended his relationship with Mary with few consequences for himself, but instead, he makes the harder, but better, the right choice. I am glad that Matthew gives us this glimpse into Joseph's story because it gives us a moment in the Christmas story that we can remember to say yes to the better choices instead of the easy ones. It reminds us that even the holy family wasn't always perfect and had an easy path. We could have had a Christmas story, nativity sets, songs, without a third part to the Holy Family. It could have just been Mary and Jesus. Or maybe Mary, Jesus, and her parents. But Joseph said yes, and so the holy family has long been the three of them.

Though most of this part of the Christmas story is fairly straightforward, there are a couple details in this part told about Joseph's side that could leave you with some questions. Mainly, what is going on with their relationship? In verse 18 it says Mary was engaged to Joseph, but it is before they lived together. Verse 19 describes Joseph as her husband and says he planned to divorce her quietly. But in verse 20 the angel says, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." and then verse 24 tells us "he took her as his wife." Oh and just for some extra details that we apparently needed to know for sure, though they were married, they did not consummate that marriage until after she gave birth." So to quickly make some sense of all that for all of us. Were Joseph and Mary married or engaged or betrothed or something else? So I did some digging to make sense of it all. In Jewish practice in that time, the courtship process was a bit more complicated and longer and more of a transaction of the wife between her family and the groom. So, the words that are used to describe Joseph and Mary and their relationship point to this time in the courtship when the groom has paid a bride-price to the bride's father, which was the final step in the courtship process, and legally was equivalent to our wedding ceremony today. BUT that payment started a year-long betrothal period where they were considered to be married but they continued to live separately, the bride staying with her father. So it is likely that at this point in Mary and Joseph's journey, Joseph had paid the bride-price to Mary's father at their engagement, but they had yet to consummate the marriage or live as a married couple. Perhaps Gabriel came to Mary to announce she was expecting near the end of this betrothal period and so, Joseph had a decision to make before the final and official step came that would make them a full husband and wife. Joseph could have chosen to demand punishment, a return of his money, and shamed Mary and her family as Mary having relations with someone else would break their marriage contract. He could also choose to dissolve the marriage agreements and contract, and cut his losses with the payment he had made to Mary's father. And before the Angel encouraged him to rethink things, it sounds like that is what he would have done. The text tells us that Joseph was

“unwilling to expose her to public disgrace and planned to divorce her quietly.” Joseph had hoped to minimize the effect on Mary anyway, but he wasn’t sure about being part of this scandalous pregnancy and the whole father to the Son of God thing. We touched a bit on it last week, but we are reminded in this text that this pregnancy would have been quite the scandal at the time. A woman for whom it should be impossible to be pregnant, is pregnant, and no matter who she claims instigated that pregnancy, it would have looked bad for her and for Joseph. For those who didn’t believe her explanation, she would have been seen to be immoral in her betrothal at the least or unfaithful to her marriage promises at most. The power of how the public responded to her pregnancy was in Joseph’s hands. He could have said she had been unfaithful and gotten her stoned, if he claimed to be part of the conception, then they could both be punished for their illicit deeds. The hardest, but the choice he goes with, is to claim he believes her, their marriage contract was not broken, continue with the marriage, and he would claim that child as his own. This would have potential punishment as that could be seen as him claiming responsibility for Mary’s state, beyond the potential legal repercussions, it was likely to push Mary and Joseph out of social favor, which had more consequences than it does now. This may not sound like such horrible consequences, but think about the way people talk and treat a couple that are believed to have had a shotgun wedding within even the last 50 years.

It isn’t so unbelievable that Joseph wasn’t so sure about jumping on board the Messiah train with Mary. It seems, based on his plans, that despite being faithful himself, he wasn’t sure Mary was telling the truth. He wasn’t sure she could really be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, he wasn’t sure if Mary’s invitation to be such a big part of God’s plan included him as a plus one. He had the option to quietly slip away from the marriage deal, I imagine there would have been some talk, but most, if not everyone in his community would have probably agreed with that choice. He was the one in the equation that was “wronged,” and even for those that didn’t see it that way, it isn’t too crazy to understand his trepidation at being part of raising the divine child of God. He could have taken his exit from that whole situation and ended up with a normal path forward. And that option was looking good. His relationship with Mary could be a bump in his rearview mirror, he could continue his life and look for a new wife. But the angel comes to him in a dream, sharing the same words that were told to Mary, calling Joseph by name, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...” and goes on to reassure Joseph that he should not be afraid of continuing his marriage contract with Mary, marrying her fully. The angel assures him that Mary is telling the truth that her baby is God’s, conceived by the Holy Spirit. And then tells Joseph what a big deal this is, “The baby is a son, who will be named Jesus, and he will save his people from their sins.” This visit and assurance from the angel gives Joseph the courage and determination to change his mind and choose the harder, but better way. He had the choice, and he chose to stay with Mary, to take on Jesus as an adopted son. He decided to say “yes” to the adventure God set up for him alongside Mary. Joseph chose the option that would put him at more risk, to do the right thing by Mary and follow-through on their promises and care for a Son that he knew wasn’t his own. Joseph chose to go forward with grace, peace, courage, faith and integrity.

Perhaps at some point while spending time with Joseph’s story you have wondered why it took the direct visit from an angel to convince him to go forward with

supporting Mary. Why did Joseph need divine intervention to make the better choice? That's a fair question for us to have, when we know the whole story, when we have the hindsight of how it worked out, when we have the proof that Mary was telling the truth, when we have heard the story for generations about Mary and Joseph as a matching set with baby Jesus. It could be easy for us to get down on Joseph, to chastise how close he was to making the wrong choice, to making the choice to step away from the divine and say no to what God wanted him to be part of, to remove himself from a story that would be told for generations. But you know what, I appreciate Joseph's part in the story. I appreciate that he reminds us that following God's hopes and plans for us isn't always an easy, "yes." His story reminds us that though we may hope for the neon flashing sign or a visit from a messenger of God telling us to accept the invitation, it is all too common for us to get an invitation, an opportunity, from God and deem it too risky, too much effort, too strange to accept. His story reminds us of the positive power and impact saying yes to the harder, but better choice can have. His story reminds us that even the people most central to Jesus's story, who we can't quite imagine it without, could need some convincing to choose the better way. His story reminds us that we aren't horrible or faithless or irredeemable if we pass on something God wants us to do, but also reminds us of the joy and amazing things that can happen if we say yes to the thing we can't foresee going well, but God wants us to do. His story reminds us that the better choice might not immediately look like a great choice, that it will end well, that it will be worth it. But Joseph's experience and the stories of so many in our scripture stories and in our faith family remind us that we should choose the better way, the way God is hoping we go.

Joseph is an example of us of how important the decisions we make are. Now I don't mean decisions like whether you put cheddar or provolone cheese on your sandwich. But, the decisions that have an impact on our life, but even more importantly the ones that can or will have an impact on others around us and those that come after us. There is so much in our lives that are the way they are because of the decisions of those who came before us. Thinking about the long-term ripples of our choices makes me think of the concept of seven generation thinking. This is an ancient philosophy that comes from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people. The philosophy emphasizes how everyone is impacted by the choices and life of those seven generations before us, and how our decisions have an impact on those that come seven generations after us. In other words, "We have inherited the consequences of the decisions of those before us, and we will pass on the consequences of our own decisions today." (Akers, Seven Generation Thinking). If those consequences are positive or negative depends on the choices we make. This thinking encourages us to think much more long-term than we are used to doing, and encourages us to be careful with making the easy choice over the better choice. This way of thinking is intended to make us a bit more cautious, but is also an amazing gift to know that what we choose to do today, will echo past our own lifespan. We may take on a harder path, we may take on some risk, we may face some scorn, but it can have a positive impact on those that come after us. Our existence makes an impact on roughly a 360 year timespan. That is intimidating, but is also incredible!

Spend a moment thinking about those in former generations have had an impact on your life? What choices of theirs have you inherited? When have our ancestors

chosen the better way and what was the impact of that decision? When I think of that question, I think about something that my grandpa shared with me when I visited with him sometime earlier this year. He pulled Brennen and I aside during a family visit because he felt he needed to make sure we knew how much of where we are in our lives traces back in huge ways to his mother. My great-grandma Bea, who my middle name is after! He shared about how she was such an influence on him taking his education seriously and putting in the extra effort to make it happen. My grandpa was the first in his family to go to college. He ended up studying and going into engineering. To get a job, he moved himself and his new wife, my grandma, to Detroit. There they started their family and stayed in that area while my grandpa worked for Chrysler. Living there and his job with Chrysler is what brought together the opportunity for my parents to meet and end up together. That brought me along. The importance of education and creating that opportunity for those who came after him continued for my grandpa. Both his daughters went to college. And he helped support his two grandchildren through their education. It was at college that I met Brennen. A traceable line between her valuing education and two generations of relationships coming together. But beyond that, as I mentioned a handful of weeks ago, she also left a legacy of faith for her family. She instilled in her family the importance and value of faith, which stuck with my grandparents, and I am sure is part of what stuck with my mom and brought her back to the church when I was young. Which raised me in the church and brought me to this point. She chose to devote so much time and effort to her faith and her church family and those choices echo all the way to me, even though I don't remember her directly. Who are those folks in your life? Who are those folks in the life of this church? Marrion Lull comes to mind and the influence on her kids and grandkids to keep the Food Pantry going and has impacted so many with that work. I think of Alice Joseph who I hear come up every time we remember those who are important ancestors of our church family. I think of Gwen Ballard who inspired and fostered such a love of music in Mike and how he has passed along his gift to others.

The impact that we can have with our choices, with the paths we take, with the things we choose to value, is incredible. Joseph's story reminds us of the impact one choice can make. Joseph reminds us that we can change our mind and make a choice that is better for all. Joseph reminds us that we can choose a better way. We can choose a better way that doesn't just benefit us but shares love, hope, peace, and joy with others. We can choose a better way that may put ourselves at some risk to show grace and care for someone else. We can choose a better way that may make things harder for us, for the positive impact it can have on someone else. We can choose a better way that prioritizes loving God and loving neighbor over all else. We can choose a better way, even when we are afraid to. We can choose a better way when we know in our hearts it is the way to go, and we don't get the neon sign from God telling us we should. We can choose a better way when we sense God at work somewhere unexpected. May we choose the better way, even when we aren't sure how important what we do is. Who would have guessed that lowly carpenter from a country town, Joseph, choosing whether or not to marry his bride that turned out to be more complicated than expected, would make an impact on one of, if not the, most famous story in the world. We may not be Joseph, our stories may not become famous or

world-renown, but we can have just as important of an impact on those who come after us. Let's go the harder, but better way.

### **Instructions for a Hard Choice by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed**

First, you must take a deep breath.  
Let oxygen dance through your lungs.  
Exhale it slowly. Allow the hurt, the shame,  
the anger to rise up in you. Let your mind run wild,  
like a million loose horses. Let the narratives unfold, unroll,  
a river of choppy water. Ask yourself how you got here. Look  
down at your feet. Roll your shoulders back. Remember who you  
are. Take another deep breath. Then, walk it back to the beginning.

Instead of looking at your feet, look at hers. Imagine where she stands. Imagine what he  
needs. Dry the  
river of false stories in your mind. Turn rushing water into a dry creek bed, certainly not  
clean enough to  
drink. Call the horses. Bring them home.  
Watch as they shake off the dust of the day. Name what  
you're feeling. Inhale again. Now you are ready  
to choose a better  
way.

call to confession

A series of experiments by Princeton psychologists, Janine Willis and Alexander  
Todorov,<sup>2</sup>

taught the world that it only takes a tenth of a second for us to form an impression of a  
stranger. In other words, it only takes a tenth of a second for us to look at someone's  
face and

determine a stereotype about who they are.<sup>3</sup>

With decisions happening that quickly, it is not hard to imagine why we might need this  
moment of confession.

The prayer of confession is an opportunity to slow down. We take that tenth of a second  
and

give it room to breathe. We reflect on the decisions that we've made this past week and  
we

ask for God's mercy to be in all of them.

And without fail, God wiggles God's self into the cracks of our lives, and we are made  
better

for it. So with that confidence, let us go to God in prayer:

prayer of confession

**God of mercy,**

a million times a day we have the opportunity to be gracious,  
to assume the best in others,  
to give the benefit of the doubt.  
A million times a day we could choose the better way,  
but so often we don't.  
Fear and greed kick in.  
Assumptions and insecurities take the wheel.  
Comparison and critique lead the charge.  
Forgive us for forgetting that we are descendants of Joseph.  
Forgive us for forgetting that grace and mercy are in our blood.  
Forgive us for forgetting that all belong to you.  
Give us the courage to love even bigger than before,  
and the wisdom to choose a better way.  
Amen.

words of forgiveness  
Family of Faith, hear this good news:  
We who have chosen wrong, are given a second chance.  
We who have lost our way, are welcomed into community.  
We who feel alone, are seen, held, and known.  
This is the good news of the gospel.  
No matter how many times we choose wrong or lose our way,  
God continues to be a God of second chances, community, and love.  
Thanks be to God! Amen.