

“Guidance We Only Dream Of”
A Advent Four, Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2016
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. OH, TO BE JOE!

What do you think? What would it have been like to be Joseph?! It must have been something else! Talk about being handed a challenging role—all guts and no glory!

Joe was a pretty ordinary guy, going about a pretty ordinary existence. Tradition has him all over the place in terms of age—anything from 19 to 90! He was a carpenter—that much we know. Though, we think of carpenters as building things out of wood. He was probably more like a stone-mason, based on what they actually had to *build* with there and then.

He was betrothed to young Mary. That much we also know. But let’s look at this “Betrothal” thing. It’s really not the same as our term “engagement.” You know, there’s a ring and some “saying yes” involved and telling the parents and friends, but if things go sour, it really isn’t the end of the world to break it off.

In the first century world Joseph and Mary lived in, betrothal was a legal contract—binding in every way. It meant you were married in every sense, *except* the marriage wasn’t consummated yet, nor did you live together.

When Joseph learns Mary is pregnant, there is only one conclusion he can make—she has been unfaithful, or the victim of rape. In either case, he could not help but feel a great sense of betrayal and anguish. No getting around it!

And, he’s left with only *two* real possibilities for how to respond; how to move on with life. He could either publicly declare his injury, in which case Mary would likely have been stoned, or he could divorce her.

Now here, the modern translation—“dismiss” is really not accurate. For to dismiss quietly a single mother and not offer the belonging and protection of marriage was only one step better than hanging her out to be stoned.

Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place! Neither of these so-called “solutions” were solutions at all. Joseph is in the most impossible of impossible situations.

Have you ever found yourself in the “Joseph Place?” That infamous “Valley of the shadow? The Place of “stuckness?”

II. GOD IS STILL SPEAKING—IN DREAMS!

And, in that awful place, Joseph falls asleep. Probably out of sheer exhaustion! Weighing all the facts, the details, the out-of-control feelings. What should he do? What had she done? Why was this happening to him? He, a righteous man! What was the right thing to do?! And if right, was it honorable? And what if “right” is legal but not ethical?

And the “Angel of the Lord” comes to him in his sleep. He “thinks” it’s “kinda like a dream”, but then again, he’s really not sure! Was he really *asleep*, after all?! You know how you sleep when you’re upset and mulling over impossible choices. Certainly not “quality time behind the eyelids!”

But, whether it was a “dream while sleeping” or a day dream matters not. For behold, a crucial message was conveyed of a “third way.” Another path he might consider in this gut-wrenching dilemma.

God’s angel spoke in the dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t *hesitate* to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will

name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.”

God is still speaking, Joseph learns that night! Wow. He has not been left alone in his agony, but has been sent a messenger from the Holy One. With words of reassurance, guidance, promise—you WILL be okay. You’ve got this. Everything is gonna be alright. And then some!

Bruce Epperly reminds us that:
“God speaks to us through a variety of media, and not just scripture. God moves through every moment of life, providing gentle nudges, insights, and synchronicities that on occasion we notice and shape our lives around. Listening to divine inspiration can be a matter of health and illness, success and failure, and life and death. In the startling account of Joseph’s dream, the Gospel of Matthew implies that the survival of Jesus depends on Joseph’s openness to listening to the wisdom of God [which came to him by a messenger in a dream.]”

Adam Hamilton, author of *The Journey—Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, that the women’s book group is reading this Advent, says of this pivotal moment:

“When life gets hard and even painful, we would do well to remember Joseph. Just as it all seems to be going wrong, it could be then that God is doing something remarkable that you or I simply cannot see yet. God takes our disappointments, heartache, and pain and uses them in profound ways. If Joseph had simply walked away that day, leaving Mary as a single mom to raise the child she was carrying, imagine what blessings he was missed and how different the Gospel story may have been.”

III. WADE IN THE WATER

Recently I was on the beach in North Carolina, attending a clergy renewal event called CREDO. The retreat center was a quick 10-minute walk from the beach, so we would hop down

there early in the morning, or any chance we got.

I grew up in Oregon, and my grandparents lived at the coast, so walking on the beach is part of my life and my very soul. I was thrilled to reconnect with that part of my being, and felt transported back by the similarity of the beaches.

In Oregon, as you might know, you rarely want to actually walk IN the water, because the immediate, excruciating ache to your feet will send you crying! You walk along the hard sand, enjoying the beautiful view and trying to keep from being blown away.

The third morning in North Carolina, after I’d taken several walks there on the shore since arriving, I was walking along, lost in thought, barefoot and feet *freezing!* (I probably *deserved* to be freezing, but I was determined to feel the sand in my toes. How often do you get to do that in Colorado?!)

After awhile I realized that the closer I got to the water line, the less my feet hurt! Huh! Could it be *warmer* closer to the water? How does *that* work?!

I finally dared to put my feet cautiously IN the water as it lapped up toward me. And, I started laughing! The water was FINE. It felt wonderful. In November, even! Soon I was splashing along, up to my calves, feet no longer aching, blissful and grateful for this epiphany. This God moment in the most unexpected presentation!

You see, I had been so conditioned—all my life long—that the water at the beach was ice-cold and caused pain, that I hadn’t even *tried* it! For three days! (Of course, I’ve been to Hawaii in winter and swam in the ocean, but that’s a whole ‘nother thing—that doesn’t look or feel like Oregon) I laughed, because I felt so clueless, so unaware, so “programmed” by what I’d assumed to be true.

How many times, do we *not* wade into the water, because we’ve

assumed—or been conditioned for too long—that it’s not hospitable? How often, have we been afraid even to dabble one toe in, just sure that it would be unpleasant?

How likely are we to completely miss the sheer JOY of delving in, splashing almost our whole selves in warmth, adventure, life?! How rarely do we “jump in with both feet” and completely give ourselves over to what awaits us?

IV. JOSEPH WADED IN

Joseph waded in the water. With both feet. Up to his ankles, his calves, his neck—or more!

He didn’t dabble just one toe in—thinking to divorce Mary quietly. He didn’t wake up in the morning and think—well, that was a strange dream, but it was JUST a dream, so I’ll forget about it. God wasn’t really talking to ME, was he?!

All the characters in the Christmas story had to jump in with both feet, if you think about it. Overcome their doubts, assumptions of what’s cold versus what’s warm and welcoming.

Every single one of them: Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, the shepherds, the angels, the Magi from afar.

Had to re-direct the path they were presently on; listen to guidance they only dreamed of, and frankly seemed preposterous!

The Divine said to Joseph, and to each one of them in their own way: “Do Not be afraid to jump in with both feet!” Even though you’re in a tough spot. Even though you’ve examined the circumstances you find yourself in, and they are quite a bit less than ideal!”

Do not be afraid, this holy week, as we round the bend from Advent into Christmas. Jump in the water, Joseph! Splash up to your knees, Mary! Run toward the stable, Shepherds! Sing with your whole heart and soul, you angels! God has come and dwelt among us! This is GOOD news of great joy!

And this is quite frankly NOT something where you can dabble one toe in, testing, checking cautiously, waiting for the data to come in.

You can’t be “a little pregnant” after all! Mary is expecting. That much is for sure! WE are expecting. The child is about to be born! Life is about to change in irrevocable ways.

“Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived.

Joseph listened, and moved beyond legalism to true compassion. He found in God – *still* speaking even to him, an ordinary guy—guidance we can only dream of! May it be so with us, Amen.