

## Joseph Chooses

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Matthew 1:18-25

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.

Some stories, before we talk about Joseph's story.

They chose to take care of her. They didn't have room at their house or money either. It was the Depression, after all. But they chose to bring cousin Lois to their house for a few years, they treated her like she was their own (she was, right then). Lois and their daughter were like sisters for the rest of their lives.

Lois chose Ed because he was funny, and because he was kind to his mother, and because she figured he would stay with her and her baby, unlike the other guy who had walked out after the birth. And she was right: Ed chose them, and they were a family.

Then Ed and Lois chose this little girl, brought her home when their son, her biological father, couldn't raise her. They chose to forego an easy retirement, to teach another child to read, to child-lock the cabinets again and bend on creaky knees to play on the floor with her and to watch, in wonder, when she ran in on Christmas mornings to see what was under the tree.

And these are the stories of the ones who nurtured the ones who nurtured the ones who nurtured *me*.

That little girl was *me*.

And so I adore the story of Joseph, because of what he chose. The family he chose to make, the child he chose to raise and love. The first adoption story in Christian history but not the last.

The first time “Love Makes a Family” shows up in the Christian salvation narrative.

I love the story of Joseph. He chose a way of love and compassion. He said yes to an angel. He stepped up to a most challenging and confusing task. He made a family through adoption. And when that family found themselves in danger, he courageously led them to safety.

Joseph, our text says, was a righteous man. He was moved by love and compassion even before the angel said a word. In a religiously and socially difficult situation, with seemingly limited options, he was moved to protect Mary and he was doing his best to figure out how.

“...Being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace...,” Joseph looked for a choice that was compassionate.

Matthew surely tells us Joseph’s story to highlight a theme from Jewish faith, from the prophet Hosea: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6) God has always desired love and mercy over sacrifice. Matthew shows Joseph, and thus Jesus, in continuity with ancient Jewish tradition. A tradition both of justice and steadfast love. As Amy-Jill Levine says, ““Matthew quotes Torah and the Prophets over and over to show Jesus’ continuity with them.”<sup>1</sup>

Matthew tells us that angels guided Joseph, along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> *Light of the World: Advent for Beginners*, Amy-Jill Levine, 2019, Kindle Edition.

And, mercy upon mercy, Joseph heard from an angel, in a dream.

*do not be afraid*

Do not be afraid.

Do. not. Be. afraid.

There is meaning and purpose in this situation that is in front of you. It is not too much. In this family, in this child, God's salvation will come. Emmanuel, God with us, will be born.

An angel of the Lord said, marry Mary, name the child *God saves, God is with us*, and raise the child as your own. Don't be afraid.

You have a good choice.

And Joseph said yes. Joseph made a choice, a beautiful and loving choice.

But Joseph's story wasn't over in Bethlehem. Turn to the next chapter of Matthew.

Then, "an angel of the Lord said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'"

I imagine, by this moment in his story, the adrenaline and ongoing worry have caught up with Joseph. But if so, the Bible gives us no indication.

I imagine, by this moment in his story, Joseph might not have known what to do, without the angel. But God showed Joseph the right choice, again.

Because Joseph - courageously, with fear and trembling - said yes. *Again.*

**14** Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt **15** and remained there until the death of Herod....

So Jesus and Mary and Joseph, brave Joseph, became refugees - the first refugees in the Christian story, but not the last.

The angels spoke to him in dreams, and Joseph chose to be loving and courageous.

I think what Joseph did what we're called to do, chose what we're called to choose. That is, to find courage when there is struggle, to choose love when we might first feel angry, even to prepare for joy when life is hard. To base our families on love. To draw on wisdom. To protect the vulnerable. To keep going, even when it means fleeing to Egypt.

Joseph had angels appear in dreams. Folks, we have angels, too. They're less obvious than Gabriel, but they show up to whisper wisdom and courage. The friend who calls just when we're too confused to make a good choice. The hymn, the

dream, the email, the Bible verse. Pointers to compassion and wisdom, courage and love.

And we have stories, like the story of Joseph. Stories help us make good choices, too.

Surely, it is good news that an ordinary person, a person faced with challenges and hardships, heard a message of God's love and courage. God might speak a word of love and courage to us, too. It is good news that all the way through Jesus' family tree, God worked through real people, complicated people, and brought forth salvation. God might offer grace and hope even in the crooked and knotted branches of our family trees. It is good news that God is at work in the most complicated families - like every one of ours. And it is good news that we can make choices based on compassion and courage, just like Joseph.

Amen.

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Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem in the voice of Mary, giving thanks for the wisdom of this one who stood by her, and Jesus, through it all. Here is that poem, O Sapientia - O Wisdom:

It was from Joseph first I learned  
of love. Like me he was dismayed.  
How easily he could have turned  
me from his house; but, unafraid,  
he put me not away from him  
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).

Thus through his love was Love obeyed.  
The Child's first cry came like a bell:  
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.  
The angel spoke: so it befell,  
and Joseph with me in my need.  
O Child whose father came from heaven,  
to you another gift was given,  
your earthly father chosen well.  
With Joseph I was always warmed  
and cherished. Even in the stable  
I knew that I would not be harmed.  
And, though above the angels swarmed,  
man's love it was that made me able  
to bear God's love, wild, formidable,  
to bear God's will, through me performed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "O Sapientia" by Madeleine L'Engle in *A Widening Light: Poems of the Incarnation* edited by Luci Shaw (Regent College Publishing, 1997) page 21



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<sup>3</sup> Image Source unknown, posted at  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2484-into-the-mess>