

Joseph: This is Not What I Planned

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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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;* and he named him Jesus. The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Well, today is Joseph's turn in the Christmas narrative. Usually, Joseph gets less air time at Christmas than the shepherds, the sheep, or the wise men. I never really thought much about Joseph before preparing for this sermon. But, I have had a ball asking people what they think about Joseph. Everybody has an opinion, even though he hardly gets mentioned at Christmas time. Only one person asked, Joseph who?

But how much does Joseph ever say in scripture? Matthew and Luke reference Joseph, but I don't find where Joseph ever said a mumbling word according to the gospel writers. Even in our text today Joseph has no voice. The angel and the narrator do all the talking. But while Joe doesn't say much, the story of Jesus' birth is incomplete without him. Sometime we don't have to say a lot in order to have a big impact. It is our mouths that frequently get us in trouble. Maybe if we talked less and listened more, the world would be a better place. Actions do speak much louder than words. And Joseph's actions spoke volumes.

Joseph was a blue collar laborer, and he had good lines or you could say good genes. He was a carpenter and he was a direct descendent of King David of the Hebrew bible. In this instance heritage mattered. In some communities today the elders want to know who are your people? Who are your parents, grandparents, and other relatives? People can get a sense of our character if they know our family background.

So Joseph came from a royal people. He was a carpenter in Jesus' birth narrative, but his great, great, great.....granddaddy was King David. According to the Hebrew Scriptures and Ancestry.com, the line of David was important. The Messiah, the Savior, the Chosen One would come from David's line.

Now, Joseph had plans for his life. He had selected this really nice girl to marry, and Mary was a teenager. He would marry her and they would have babies, have a great Jewish family, live according to the religious laws and customs, and live happily ever after. Sweet! What's not to love about that story?

We have plans too for our lives, or had plans. We would finish college, travel around the world, have a career, get married, buy a cute little house, run a marathon, have babies, eventually grand babies, and then make our transition into eternity at a ripe old age of 110. The end! Sweet!

Those may have been our plans, But then life happens. Life happens and the baby comes before the marriage. Life happens and the hoped for career never materializes. Life happens and you had to drop out of college to financially support the family. Life happens and some illness demands our time, attention, and finances. Life happens and you realize you like dogs more than babies (and your significant other really wants children) . Life happens and you end up with the woman of your dreams instead of the man of your dreams--or vice-versa. So sometimes life doesn't turn out the way we envisioned it.

Yet when we are envisioning our lives, we may forget to check in with God regarding our life's purpose. We may have God given gifts, talents, and skills. And, we may have been placed in specific places at ordained times in order to fulfill a divine purpose. Yet, if we **don't** check in with God about why we are here at this time and place, we may miss our divine appointment. Mordecai told his niece Esther in the Hebrew Bible that perhaps she had come to royal dignity for such a time as this. And the time had come for her to speak up and save her people.

So while Joseph had worked it out in his head how life would be once he married, God had a totally different set of plans. Now, there was this baby thing happening before the official wedding ceremony--definitely scandalous for a righteous descendent of the king! For Joseph, this was not what he planned.

Now, Joseph knew it wasn't his baby so he had a couple of options. He could have had Mary publicly shamed and stoned to death or he could quietly divorce her. Either option was sanctioned by his religious laws. Obviously Joseph cared a great deal about Mary, so he was going to be generous and just get a quiet divorce. He wanted to quietly put all this behind him.

And then the angel showed up and called him by his full name. Joseph, son of David. When I am called by my full name, Patricia Lotrece Hunter, either I am in big trouble, or I am being recognized for something important—like a graduation or an award. In either situation it is an occasion to pay attention. The angel reminded Joseph where he had come from. He was the descendent of royalty, the son of David. There were expectations of Joseph that others didn't have because of this royal ancestral lineage.

Then the angel said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Afraid? Joseph may have been afraid of the dream and the angel, but the first reaction of the men I know would not have been fear. The men I know would have been ticked off and mad as you know what about their fiancé being pregnant and you don't know who is the baby daddy! So I'm sure Joseph had to work through some major anger issues before he got to the fear stage. This was not what Joseph planned.

And so it is with us. When life doesn't turn out according to our script we can be furious at God, the world, and ourselves. God why did you bring this woman into my life. God why didn't the election turn out the way I wanted? God why didn't I get that job? God why did I fail that exam? God why won't people take global

warming seriously and show up for meetings? God why did you give me this disease? God this is just not fair!

The scripture says Joseph was a righteous man. He knew God and he knew God's faithfulness to his people. Joseph knew that God would fulfill God promises and God can do anything but fail. So although his engagement/wedding/family script was not unfolding anything like he thought, a new door was opening for him to walk through. The angel said to continue with the wedding. Have Mary as your wife, and name the boy Jesus. In other words, don't be afraid to walk through the other door that God has opened for you.

Sometimes faith is seeing the closed door, maybe not understanding why it closed, but trusting another door is open somewhere. Faith is believing that when God says no to our plans, that God has a better plan. Faith is believing that sometimes it takes years for all the pieces of life's puzzle to come together for us to have the desires of our hearts. She had to go there, he had to come here. We had to have these experiences. I had to let go of these things and you had to let go of a few things too. But, eventually, it will work out. Eventually, the puzzle will come together. Dr. King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you **don't** see the whole **staircase.**"

Joseph had to trust God, and believe that although things were not moving according to his plans, everything would be alright. One of my friends reminded me that Joseph was a strong man because it takes a strong man to raise a child that is not his own. God knew Joseph was the one to be the earthly father of Emmanuel—the one who would remind us that God is always with us. God knew that Joseph would not get in the way of God using Jesus to be the ultimate

example of God's love and compassion. God knew Joseph was the one who wouldn't be upset that his notoriety would be less than his son's. This was not Joseph's plan at all. But, it was God's plan. And we are grateful that Joseph said yes to God.

In our disappointments we can still say yes God. Yes, I will trust you. Yes, I will follow you. Yes, I will continue to praise you. Yes, I will continue to pray. Yes, I will continue to sing. Yes, I will continue to serve. Yes, I will continue to seek your favor.

The character of our faith is determined not so much by how we handle the good times, but by how we handle adversity. Do we fall apart, and say woe is me, we can't go on? Or, do we say OK, I don't like this. I don't see how this is going to work, but not my will but thy will be done.

The Christmas carol says, Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the new born king. I believe the angels rejoice and sing whenever we say, yes God to your will and your way—even when God's plans are different from what we dreamed or imagined.

Please stand and let's sing Hark the Herald Angels Sing #144