

Love is Calling: Joseph's Story

Isn't it a relief to hear a story of a famous man who knew how to treat a woman with respect? After weeks of the other sort of story in the news, it's good to be in church! On this fourth Sunday of Advent, which also happens to be the day before Christmas this year, it is good to hear about Joseph.

Joseph is the least known of the members of the Holy Family. He is the strong, silent type, who stands behind a kneeling Mary and a radiant Jesus in the manger. Yet despite his quiet role as the earthly father of Jesus, he is indispensable to the story, absolutely critical to the salvation story and God's plan.

Right from the start, we hear in Joseph's story the concern of the gospel writer Matthew for the relationship between the Law of Moses and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Matthew's is the gospel in which, in his ministry, Jesus will say repeatedly, "You have heard it said, but I say to you. . ." and then he intensifies the meaning of the Law. So it's not the letter of the Law, but the purpose of the Law which matters most under Christ. And Joseph gets that message.

He was a righteous man, the scripture tells us. Which means he was obedient to the Law, he was a just man. He didn't make things up to suit the situation, or to make things more favorable for himself. His understanding of the common good was that he was subject to the same laws as everyone else. So when he learned that Mary was pregnant, he knew what he needed to do. He would follow the conventions of his community.

Now, in that time and place, to be engaged to be married meant the same legal bond as marriage. The bond could only be ended by death or divorce. The Law of Moses found in Deuteronomy is clear that the sin of adultery, of which Mary was apparently guilty, merited a punishment of death by stoning. So if Joseph's governing principle had been the letter of the Law, Mary would have died a horrible death, her unborn child with her. End of salvation story!

But scholars tell us that by the first century, the rabbis had mitigated this punishment. As rabbis do, they had undoubtedly debated and argued and settled on a penalty which was severe, but did not result in immediate death. Mercy had entered into the administration of the Law. The righteous, and merciful, thing for Joseph to do in this shameful situation would be to divorce Mary. She would be outcast, with no husband to protect or provide for her and her child. She would live on the margins, perhaps as a beggar, perhaps with no other resort than to sell her body in order to have food to eat and a place to sleep. One perceived sexual sin would have led to a lifetime of being named a sexual sinner. Women on the margins are still forced into this choice at times. If Joseph's governing principle was merciful administration of the Law, then the course of Mary and Jesus' lives would have been very different. And the salvation story? We can only guess how God might have worked that out.

But Joseph was visited by an angel, a messenger from God with a guiding principle, a word from God which outplayed the justice of the Law and even its more merciful version. The message from God was that the prophet's promise of salvation was growing in Mary's womb. That Joseph should not be afraid. (Messengers from God always tell people not to be afraid.) That Joseph could be part of God's salvation story by carrying through on this engagement, completing the marriage covenant, becoming

the husband of Mary and the adoptive father of Jesus. The new governing principle, under the dawning reign of the Messiah, the Christ, was Love.

And Joseph did it. He answered this call, he stepped out where others would have backed away--and the rest is history.

Not many of us can tell a story as stunning, or historic, as Joseph's. Few people today speak of angelic visitations, and frankly, we tend to dismiss those persons as maybe "a little off." Most of the time, we receive our messages, our calls from God, in more mundane ways. And one of those ways is through the scripture. When we let a story like Joseph's penetrate our lives, we open ourselves to divine call.

I believe that each and every one of us is called to be part of God's story, the story of salvation and the healing of the world. If we spend our days listening to all the bad news that's out there, to all the voices telling us to be afraid, to all the self-serving, evil, immoral, untruthful people who are dominating our public discourse--well, then, of course we will be discouraged and fearful and lacking hope for the world. My friends, we have an alternative message from God which is totally contrary to the prevailing culture. Like Joseph, we need to wake from our sleep and do the right thing. Which is: to be ruled by Love.

What strikes me about Joseph is that even though he was "just" a carpenter from a tiny village in an occupied country, he used his power to change the world. His power was small in the eyes of the world. He wasn't a king, or a governor, or a religious leader. He wasn't a rich man. He was pretty ordinary. But as a man, he had the power to save a woman and her child, to rescue them from the edge of poverty and ostracism. Power is not a good thing, or a bad thing, in and of itself. It is how power is used that determines whether it is good or evil. Joseph had power, and he recognized it, and he used it for the good of the world. He gave shelter to the most vulnerable, a young woman and her unborn child.

It wasn't romantic love which motivated Joseph. These were days long before romantic love was considered a reason to marry. Joseph was motivated by divine Love, the power at the heart of the universe.

Love is a power we all have. And love is a power we are all called to use. To protect the vulnerable. To give life to those on the edge. To heal the world. To be part of God's salvation story.

I know, most of us are pretty ordinary. Just trying to get by, dealing with our own problems, taking care of our families. Time is limited, money is limited, and the world's problems are really big. But we all have a measure of power. I daresay, we all have more power than we think we have. With each dollar we spend, with each hour of our lives, within every relationship we have, we are making choices about how we use our power. If we think about our money, our time, our talents, and our relationships, we can recognize that indeed, we do have power.

The real life, not-so-far away person who I can't stop thinking about when I look for someone who has a call like Joseph's call, and who uses her power the courageous way Joseph used his power, is a woman named Mary Poole who lives in Missoula. A couple of years ago, she saw the photo we all saw of the small Syrian boy washed up on the beach. As a mother of a small child, she felt what she calls "an incomprehensible drive and need to do more for families that were fleeing war." She began learning more, and gathering people together to form a local non-profit to welcome refugees to Missoula. Not being a very political person, she was surprised at the resistance they encountered. But, not being a

very political person, she had the ability to talk with people opposed to the idea in a way which respected differences of opinion and broke down the fears. In a little over a year's time, with her gentle leadership and the help of hundreds of others, Missoula has welcomed about 30 families, including about 120 individuals, from the Congo, Iraq, Eritrea, Syria, and Ethiopia.

Earlier this year, the Starbucks corporation chose her in their "Upstanders" series, and made a video about her. In the 8-minute video, which I highly recommend, she is about 8 months pregnant. She is an ordinary mom, with an extraordinary call. She says, "If you looked at the whole picture, it would seem impossible. But if you just looked at making one more phone call, researching this a little bit longer, the little tiny steps were doable. Anyone could do it." (<https://softlandingmissoula.org/>) Google "Soft Landing Missoula" if you want to hear her inspiring, ordinary story. She has a call to use her power to protect the vulnerable. She has a call which is governed by Love.

In our places, in our time, in our families and community and shared world, we have the same call. Mother Teresa is famously quoted, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Like Joseph did. His small actions guarded the Savior of the world. There's a reason God came to us as a baby. God wants us to pay attention to the vulnerable, the poor, the defenseless, the most needy among us. God wants us to be vessels of Love, using the power of Love to protect Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Listen! Love is calling! His name is Jesus.