

Matthew 1:18-25

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Sunday, December 22, 2024

Joseph's Dream (or was it a nightmare?)

My name is supposed to be Jamie. James Frederick Harrell. However, when I was born in 1963, my mother was under anesthesia during delivery. Before she regained consciousness, my grandmother persuaded my father to alter the name to include her husband's. Furthermore, when my father informed the nurse that my name should be Frederick Ormond Harrell, he was unsure of the spelling of "Frederick" and told her to "just put Fred." This is what my mother woke up to. She called me "baby boy" for my first two years because she couldn't call a little boy "Fred" she used to say. True Story! I had a rough start y'all!

Our youngest was to be named McKenzie Ellis Harrell. After Terely gave birth on Saturday, I announced her arrival to our church the next morning. However, when I visited the hospital that afternoon and asked Terely about McKenzie, she replied, "Her name is Lunden." I responded, "Well, the congregation thinks her name is McKenzie, so I have some calls to make!" (Lunden, btw, is very happy she's named Lunden instead of McKenzie)

Those two stories are messy. This story is messy too. Matthew loves messy stories. Between the cast of characters in the genealogy, to the stories he chooses to include, Matthew is saying "Following Jesus is messy business". Following Jesus is never the "easy way out" of anything it seems.

But Joseph? He needed an angel to intervene, but he embraced the messiness. The dream may have felt equal parts dream and equal parts nightmare, but in the end, he gets it right.

First, imagine how shell-shocked Joseph must have been. "Who is this person?" he must be thinking. Which, when I think about it, is something that comes out of every married person's mouth at some point! She doesn't seem like she'd be unfaithful this way. How will Joseph respond?

If he wants to be biblical? He can find scriptures that tell him his responsibility is to divorce her and stone her. We might say to Joseph "Well, the Scriptures are clear." Beware anyone who tells you such a thing, because you know we can get "the Scriptures" to justify just about anything. The text says Joseph will "dismiss her quietly."

Joseph asks a better question than “what is the biblical thing to do.” He asks, apparently, what is the way of love here? Given his understanding, he was choosing the way of least humiliation. The easy choice for Joseph is to follow the letter of the law, which would have Mary shamed and blamed and discarded. The harder choice, which may lead to persecution, is choosing the way of love.

Maybe, years later, when Jesus was brought to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus thought to himself, “This could have happened to my mom! And my dad would not allow it. I won’t allow it either.” As he saved that woman in John, Chapter 8, from stoning.

But I don’t suspect anyone in this room is thrilled with Joseph’s less-than-completely awful response. He needed a dream. And he got one.

And it begins with the most common one-liner in the Bible. “Do not be afraid.” Said some 365 times in Scripture. Because God knows fear is what drives most of our lives. And Joseph is understandably afraid. He, like us on many occasions, finds himself in an unexpected predicament.

What are yours?

- Never thought I’d still be single
- Never thought I’d be childless
- Never thought my marriage would end
- Never thought my career would be like this
- Never thought I’d get this diagnosis
- Never thought Middle School would be this hard
- Never thought my parents would divorce
- Never thought I’d lose so much in this life

Never thought. You stand with Joseph and Mary today when you say, “I never thought.”

Joseph is told those famous lines of the Christmas story:

“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.”

Joseph is called by the dream to something far more radical than a quiet dismissal. He is called to embrace her pregnancy as an act of the Holy Spirit, which means to follow God by not following the law. Imagine the criticism this would invite.

Joseph chose to embrace good news in the midst of a lot of bad news because that's usually the only way good news comes to us. He has no idea how this is going to turn out. The Disciples had no idea how Jesus would turn out. They all embraced good news. Why?

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

Isaiah from 740 years previous: God can be trusted. God is with us. The original "god with us" had to do with a potential military conflict and the prophet is reassuring them saying "as surely as this woman (not virgin) will give birth to a child, so will God be your advocate, will be with you, etc." That's the original "God with us."

But Joseph could take it farther. If this dream is true? God is with us in radical solidarity and full participation of all that it means to be human! Joining us, **AS US**. Identifying with our humanity in all its pain, loss, sorrow, and joy. If we can believe that, perhaps we can begin, to trust God in all of our "never thought, this ..." moments. To begin to believe that God is **for** YOU, and **for** US, and all humanity.

"For whatever reason, God chose to make man as he is — limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death — He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile."

— Dorothy Sayers

Do you want the Advent courage of Joseph? God with us, in radical solidarity with humanity, has the potential to make you fearless. Amen.