

“What Decision Do You Need to Reconsider?”

Matthew 1:18-25

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How long do you think it took Joseph to go to sleep that night? When people are wrestling with tough decisions, as Joseph was, they are usually restless and find it almost impossible to sleep. I am sure you understand.

What was weighing so heavily on Joseph’s mind that night? What interrupted his sleep? After all, this was an exciting time in his life. He and Mary were engaged and getting everything ready for their wedding and life together after the celebration.

Sure, it was a busy time, but it was the type of activity that puts a smile on your face and joy in your heart, the kind that should make you sleep better instead of interrupting it.

The way Matthew tells the story, Mary had to tell Joseph something even she found hard to believe. She was going to have a baby, and Joseph was not the father.

I cannot imagine how difficult this was for Mary. She knew what would be expected of Joseph by some of the leaders of the community. Being the righteous man he was, Joseph would be expected to break off their engagement, publically shame Mary for being promiscuous and have her stoned. To do any less would be a violation of the Law and lead to more questions and ridicule.

You see why Joseph tossed and turned that night. This good man could not treat Mary this way, even if she had disappointed him. This was why Joseph decided to break off their engagement and quietly send her away.

Having made this painful decision, Joseph fell asleep.

Matthew tells us an angel visited Joseph while he was asleep, urging him to reconsider his decision to terminate his relationship with Mary. The angel informed Joseph that Mary had not been promiscuous; the baby she was carrying did not belong to another man.

God was at work in Mary's life, and Mary and her baby needed Joseph's support. Just as Mary trusted God and yielded to God's will, so God needed Joseph to follow her lead.

When Joseph awoke, he did not carry out his plan to send Mary away. He did just the opposite and took Mary as his wife, becoming the husband Mary could rely upon and a loving father to her son.

You know what intrigues me most about this story? Joseph never speaks, at least not with words. As a matter of fact, unlike Mary, I don't think Joseph ever speaks in scripture. This righteous man's life and example, however, speak loudly and clearly.

What does Joseph say to us through his actions? Let me share some ideas I thought about as I pondered this passage last week.

There is always more to a story than meets the eye. This was certainly true for Mary and Joseph. What appeared to be an indiscretion on Mary's part was actually an act of obedience to God. What a difference this revelation made in the way Joseph handled Mary's dilemma.

This is why it is important for us to be good listeners who refuse to jump to conclusions. There are two sides to every story, and we do no one a favor by jumping to conclusions and making decisions without all the facts.

We don't get every decision right the first time, and wise is the person who changes his or her mind when more details are revealed. For me, the most striking part of this story is Joseph's willingness to change his mind after he discovered why Mary was going to have a baby.

He could have refused to reconsider the decision he made before he slept and continued with his plan to send Mary away. He chose, however, to do what was best even if it meant changing his mind. Too much was at stake for Joseph to be stubborn, defensive and wrong.

Humility is a trait of a righteous person. The ability to admit there is a better way forward and change direction before it is too late is the sign of a mature person and a faithful believer.

Just because we have the right to do something does not mean we should.

What we have the right to do is not always what God calls us to do.

Joseph had to decide between what he had the right to do according to the ancient writings of his ancestors, stone Mary to death, and what the angel was encouraging him to do, take Mary as his wife. That evening, judgment and mercy clashed, and this righteous man chose mercy.

Wise is the person who knows when to follow Joseph's example.

The best way to help someone who is facing an intimidating challenge is to walk by their side and let them know they are not alone. Fear loses its grip on us when we are holding the hand of a loving family member or dear friend. Be that kind of faithful friend.

My favorite scene in the 2006 Christmas movie, *The Nativity Story*, was the time Joseph and Mary were on their way out of the village of Nazareth to make the one hundred mile trek to Bethlehem. Caesar ordered a census and each male had to return to his place of birth with his family to register. In this scene, Mary was riding on a donkey and Joseph was walking alongside her.

By this time, the citizens of Nazareth had shunned Mary because they thought she had been promiscuous. They would not talk to Mary or have anything to do with her any longer. Because Joseph stood by her, his good name and reputation tumbled just like Mary's.

In this departing scene, the people watched as Mary and Joseph slowly made their way out of town. As they passed the people, most of them looked at Mary with contempt and deliberately looked away after catching a glance of her. No one waved, said goodbye or offered words of encouragement for the long journey.

As they passed the last person and headed out of town, Joseph said to Mary with a twinkle in his eye and a bit of sarcasm in his voice, "These people are really going to miss us." Everyone in the theater laughed.

As I watched this particular scene in the movie, it dawned on me that the best way to reach out to people who are struggling is to walk alongside them. This is what Joseph did for Mary, which was the gift she needed the most. Had Joseph abandoned Mary, I am not sure she would have survived. With him by her side, she could handle even the most painful slurs and frightening scenarios.

One person can make a big difference in the life of someone facing a stiff challenge. Be that person.

What impact do you think Joseph's decision to marry Mary and provide her with a safe home had upon Jesus? I think it shaped and molded him into the person he became. All throughout his public ministry, Jesus reflected not only God's heart but Joseph's, too.

Do you recall the time the woman caught in adultery was dragged before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees? The religious authorities, who wanted to stone her according to the Law, asked Jesus what he thought they should do.

How did Jesus respond to her dilemma and their expectations? "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her," John 8:7.

Who taught him to stand up for the underdog? Where did he learn to be an advocate for the powerless and help those in despair? Who encouraged him to walk alongside those who were struggling so they would never be alone?

Who modeled this level of compassion, grace, love and hope? I believe it was the man who changed his mind and married his mother when everybody expected him to send her away.

Who needs you to love them like this? Who needs you to listen to their story and give them another chance? Who needs you to walk alongside them, offering encouragement and support? Who needs you to model this level of compassion and grace?

It could very well be someone at your Christmas gathering.

I do not believe it was coincidental that the first story associated with Jesus was a story about compassion, mercy, grace, hope, second chances and sacrificial love. Isn't this the good news Jesus proclaimed? Isn't this what it means to be righteous in God's eyes?

Look around the room when you gather with your family this week and ask God to show you who needs a special touch from you, then follow Joseph's example. I assure you it will make a difference in your life as well as theirs.