

St. Cyprian's, Hampton, VA
December 22nd, 2019
4th Advent (A)
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Matthew 1:18-25

As a R&B music fan and collector since my teenage years, I have heard almost everything that Barry Gordy and Motown Records ever produced, not to speak of other work that came out of such places as Chicago and Mussel Shoals, Alabama. Since my teens there has never been a time that I haven't enjoyed traditional R&B music. Lately, perhaps as a function of age and life experience, I have begun to hear the music and the lyrics differently. I'm finding themes in a song that I'd never heard before, perhaps in a song that I may have heard, literally, thousands of times. This is particularly true for R&B that was produced in the late 60s and early 70s when theme of racial struggle was so prominent in the work of many artists and groups – a theme I was somewhat deaf to at the time.

Today I am hearing and reading the story of Mary, Joseph and God in a different way. I am hearing the story of two people, most certainly in an arranged marriage, who were struggling to care for and about one another, even to find love.

American culture and media both load Christmas with intense expectations of family harmony and good cheer. The story of Mary and Joseph is not one of those stories. The first Christmas was not a flawless family values tale told by people whose seasonal smiles were indelibly fixed upon their faces. No, this was not what we used to call a beautiful scene from a Currier and Ives Christmas canvas. Like many, if not most of us, the people in this story failed to live up to the notion of a "perfect Christmas."

Joseph, we're told, wanted to do right by the young girl Mary to whom he was engaged. Yet, all of a sudden his fiancé was pregnant – and Joseph didn't do it. He'd heard from Mary what he may have thought to have been a fantastic story about her having been made pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Did he – did Joseph buy it? Joseph, at first uncertain about the cause of Mary's pregnancy, feared that his fiancé had been unfaithful. Then and now that was adultery.

How could he believe her? How? Joseph was engaged in the ultimate struggle. Little did he know that this was a struggle for the nurture of the one who would be the eternal God and would become flesh to dwell among us.

In the 1970s the Swedish producer, director and writer Ingmar Bergman produced a six-part TV miniseries entitled "Scenes from a Marriage." So popular was this series that Bergman later made it into a stage play. It is the story of a couple by the names of, not Mary and Joseph, but Marianne and Johan. As the story unfolds the audience is swept into their acclaimed and near perfect marriage. Yet as the plot

develops their perfect marriage unravels into an absolutely hellish situation of infidelity and betrayal that is marked with incredible sadness.¹

Like Marianne and Johan, Mary and Joseph's perfect intentions for their life together ended were for a time not-so-perfect at all.

However, in the Bergman story, Marianne and Johan never got over their lack of faithfulness to one another. In their lives together Marianne and Johan reached the same decision point as had Mary and Joseph twenty centuries before. Yet, because Mary and Joseph chose to take a different path, a life path of trust beyond their absolute knowing, all those centuries later our world has been radically altered.

On a recent afternoon at Northwestern University Dr. Alexandra Solomon, a recognized professor and researcher on the subject of marriage, was engaged in a seminar with her graduate students. She was leading them in a colloquy based upon the question of when there will be time in their lives for committed relationships, perhaps even a relationship that would lead to love.

One male student said, "Growing up, there's immense pressure from parents and other authority figures to focus on the self. It's hard to find time for relationships when the baseball team practices at 6:30 (in the morning), (and) school starts at 8:15, drama rehearsal is at 4:15 (in the afternoon)..." and so on.

A female student agreed saying "...she finds this attitude that love and relationships are secondary to academic and professional success hard to shake. She stated, 'Before, it was, well, I need to finish school. But next, I'll need to get a practice going. Then, it'll be I need to do this and this, and then I'll think about love. But by 30, we wake up and are like, what is love? What's it like to be in a loving relationship outside your family.'"²

Do you and I actually want to commit to the time it takes to be in loving relationships, or are we so busy trying to follow and meet the lofty and at times unrealistic cultural expectations we have set for one another that there is little time for, as stated by the female student, being "...in a loving relationship outside..." of our families? Joseph and Mary, but particularly Joseph, were caught up in the same conundrum. Do we follow the cultural norms that our society has set for us, or do we commit to one another and hope to find love?

Today living in the midst of a culture that at the very best promotes the narrative of a nostalgic birth in a pristine stable, we have forgotten that the story of Mary and Joseph is nothing short of scandalous.

¹ <https://cinapse.co/criterion-review-ingmar-bergmans-scenes-from-a-marriage-644ca74ae7a>. Accessed 12/17/19.

² Jessica Renee Patchett, "Love: What Are You Waiting For?" (*Journal for Preachers*: Advent 2019), 23-24.

Most of us are all too much like Joseph who wanted to do the minimally upsetting thing, and leave Mary to the care of her parents in their home where she could quietly have a baby. In the small town of Nazareth where Mary and her family lived, Joseph wanted to do the right thing according to the rules and norms of his culture. For Joseph, doing the right thing meant that he would have to address the fact that Mary had simply violated the important moral rule that she should not be pregnant when they were married. This was a huge problem. To begin with, I can only imagine how initially Mary took the news that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We know of Mary's response as the Magnificat which begins "My soul doth magnify the Lord." I for one believe that it is likely her initial response may not have been as holy and sacred. Teenage Mary may have responded: "Really! You've got to be kidding me!" For both Mary and Joseph the expectations of their culture were running into headlong conflict with God's call to them.

How could Mary and Joseph get beyond their doubts of and about one another to rebuild their relationship?

Later Joseph, after a dream-like angelic visitation the Holy Spirit origin of Mary's pregnancy is confirmed for him. The angel admonishes Joseph to let go of his fear of the emerging scandal, no doubt a fear that ate away at him from within; a fear that for a season of life he could not shake.

In the Bible from time to time there are people who make absolutely pivotal moves in life in which they turn from serving themselves and serving the dictates of their culture to serving the needs of God's people. Almost like the Apostle Paul when he on the road to Damascus found faith was given his sight,³ Joseph likewise makes a pivotal decision to turn from the expectations of his culture, and to continue his life journey with Mary and the child she was carrying. Joseph's decision would have eternal consequences. Joseph decided to take Mary as his spouse, to live out his love for her and to be as much of an earthly father to their son as possibly he can be.

The child whom Mary carried already had a name: Jesus. Though the heavenly parent may be the Holy Spirit, during Jesus' life, especially during his early years, the only earthly father Jesus ever knew was Joseph. We all know about the formative years of a child's life and how influential the parents can be for the child's development. Perhaps the most formative influence that a parent can have upon the life of a child is love. The care and nurture of a child, even when that care and nurture is required at 2 o'clock in the morning, is essential. Given what we know about the man into whom Jesus grew, I believe we can be assured that for him the love of earthly parents Mary and Joseph was more than ample.

Though we know much about the succeeding chapters of Jesus' life and how he came to save us, I think it's important for us to explore this simple story of Mary and Joseph, two people become one, and the loving decisions both had to make.

³ Acts 9:1-18, NRSV.

Those decisions were made for one another, for the child whom they would raise and for all of us many centuries later.

I have a friend who, when it comes to God's guidance in our lives, likes to quote a passage from the Psalms of David: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."⁴ My friend says that though believes this to be absolutely true, the light only shines down the path; only as far as the next step. When you step beyond the lighted path into the darkness of the unknown, you are stepping by faith. We walk by faith, not by light. Joseph and Mary were challenged to trust and to walk by faith, far beyond where the light of certainty illuminated their path.

As in early marriage story of Mary and Joseph, God calls us to rise to the calling God has for us; even when we know not where the journey will take us, or the path that God has set before us.

Shortly several our St. Cyprian's people will gather with me around the baptismal font for the confirmation of their baptism vows, to be received into this branch of the Christian faith or to reaffirm their commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you are one of those who will gather at the baptismal font with me, I would like for you to stand.

I know from our earlier conversation that not only are you affirming your commitment to follow Jesus, but also that you are willing to give yourself over to the loving relationship with Jesus Christ and other Christ-followers.

Though I can give you the faithful assurance that as you surrender yourself to following Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit of God will be with you, that is about as far down your path that I – or for that matter any of us – can see. I don't know where your life journey will take you. However, I DO know that like Mary and Joseph you will at times be called to live by faith – and not by sight. My friends, to follow this path is to embark upon your journey with our Lord Jesus.

Candidates, are you ready to do this with me?

⁴ Psalm 119:105, NRSV.