

## The Choice of Love

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There is a story told of a church where the same Christmas pageant was performed on Christmas Eve for years. Using the traditional words from the KJV of the Bible the play talked of Mary “being large with child” and all the events that took place in Bethlehem. Various children played the parts in the play and as those children grew up, another generation of children took their places. For almost fifty years that church performed the same pageant at Christmas.

One year, it was decided to modernize the words in the play. On Christmas Eve, the new words were being spoken and everyone was enjoying the drama until it came to the part where the narrator used the updated words and announced that Mary was pregnant. The young man playing Joseph looked confused, bewildered, and instead of his line about going to Bethlehem to take part in the census he turned to fiancé and loudly announced “What do you mean that you’re pregnant?”

In our gospel reading for this day, Joseph has a problem. He’s engaged, his fiancé becomes pregnant, and the baby isn’t his. The Bible doesn’t actually tell us what Joseph is feeling but we can imagine the state he is in- confused, bewildered, and hurt by what is happening. But while our lesson doesn’t tell us about his emotional state in this personal crisis, it does tell us something important. That Joseph is a righteous man.

And that doesn’t mean that Joseph is holier than thou or that he is always correct, or he never does wrong. No, when the Bible tells us that Joseph is a righteous man it means that he tries to be good, to be caring, to do the right thing no matter how hard it is for him. Joseph is a righteous man. And that explains why Joseph does what he does.

Because our lesson tells us that Joseph decides to end the engagement quietly and not publically shame Mary. Now under the law and customs of the time he has the option to let everyone know why he is breaking off the engagement and draw attention to her pregnancy. He could make an issue of his feelings of betrayal and embarrass her and her family. But he chooses not to do that. He chooses instead to treat her with care, with compassion, and to keep things private.

And the fact that Joseph is a righteous man also explains his reaction to the dream

which tells him what is happening with Mary. Because let's be honest even though the scripture says it is a dream from God the truth is that Joseph still has to make a choice about what to do with his fiancé. He could decide to end things with her and walk away from her and the child. But because he is a righteous man he chooses to continue with the engagement and, and I really don't think we spend enough time acknowledging this at Christmas, Joseph chooses to raise Jesus as his son.

Because think about that for a moment. Joseph knows that the child is not his. All he has as proof about what God is doing is the dream he has, and yet he chooses to continue the engagement, accept whatever scandal might come from having a baby born early and the whispers and shame that might bring to him, and raise Jesus as his own flesh and blood.

Joseph has a choice which he makes at Christmas- the same as Mary does when the angel Gabriel comes and tells her what God intends asks if she will be part of God's plan. And Joseph chooses to believe, to hope, to have faith, which when added to his righteousness makes all the difference. For faith and righteousness put together mean that Joseph chooses love and the Christmas story unfolds.

Growing up at my house Christmas morning was always filled with joy and excitement. There were presents, treats, and surprises. And the joy and excitement usually lasted until 20 minutes after the last present was opened. Because that was when the lack of sleep and the overload of candy would take over. And my brother and I would start to snap at each other which would draw in visiting cousins and then there would be drama and raised voices.

And my grandmother, bless her would always step in at this point, and remind us of what the day was about and calmly solve whatever unimportant thing had set us off, send whoever was exhausted to have a nap, and usher in the type of Christmas all of us want. She would in her calm and patient manner remind us that Christmas was the choice God made in sending Jesus and Christmas is the choice we have to make as a result.

For while we don't often think of it that way the truth is that each and every one of us have a choice at Christmas. The choice of receiving the Christ Child or not making room for him, the choice of being changed or staying the same, the choice of having faith or not believing. And in some ways the choice we have isn't that

much different than Joseph's.

Because we can try to make the most of a bad situation, we can try to do what is right, we can try to be good people. But being righteous isn't the end of what we should do at Christmas because righteousness is only the beginning. For the promise which God makes to us in Jesus isn't about us doing the best we can but in us taking our place in what God is doing. And that requires us to choose love. To embrace love, to receive love, and then to allow love to change us.

Which means that we will give not just because we want to or feel moved but because we know it is the right thing to do and the faithful way to answer God in our lives. And we will let generosity open our hearts and our hands.

We will be patient not because we have an endless store of patience but because we know that patience is the caring way to answer our stressed and frantic world. And we will let peace surround us and guide us.

We will listen to God speaking to us, in the music, the people around us, and maybe even in a dream we have, because we know we don't have all the answers and sometimes the way forward is not to do what we think but to be faithful and do as God asks. And we will let faith become the foundation of our lives.

Christmas is God's answer to the world. The decision God makes in the face of our sin and troubles is a baby filled with promise born in the manger. And at Christmas we are given many wonderful examples of how to respond to that child- we can sing like the angels, we can run and see like the shepherds, we can treasure the experiences in our hearts like Mary.

And we can make that child, that promise, part of our lives like Joseph. Understanding that nothing will never be the same again as we choose love and let the child born in Bethlehem become part of our lives and our world.