

## SEARCHING TO SERVE

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Matthew 1:18-25

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of the Season of Advent. Christmas will arrive on Tuesday (assuming that Amazon delivers it on time). During this season of Advent, I have preached a three-part sermon series based on the figures that we find in our Nativity Scene. With each one I've asked the question, what is it that they are searching for. The shepherds represent the people of the land who were searching for a king to free them from the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. The Magi represent the world beyond Israel and their search for a true God. I'm not sure what the animals were searching for. I imagine they needed some peace and quiet and just wanted everyone to get out of their barn.

Today we arrive at the figures of Mary and Joseph. We know a lot more about Mary than we do about Joseph. Mary is covered pretty extensively in the Gospel of Luke. In that book, Luke provides a detailed account of the birth of both Jesus and John the Baptist. John is born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke offers a complex account of how Zechariah is visited by the Gabriel the angel who informs Zechariah that his wife—despite her age—will bear a son who is to be named John.

Not long after, Gabriel makes a visit to Mary in Nazareth and informs her that she will soon conceive and give birth to a son. About this child, Gabriel tells the young woman, *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end* (Luke 1:32-33). Mary asks how this can be since she has not been with a man. The answer is *nothing will be impossible with God*. Mary's response to this divine news is straightforward. She says, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*.

Joseph, on the other hand, gets a lot less attention in the gospels. What we know about Joseph is found mostly in Matthew's gospel. The first thing we learn is that Mary and Joseph are engaged. Engagement in that society was much different that it is for us today. For us, an engagement is a non-binding agreement between two parties. An engagement can be easily broken. The parties can simply walk away if they wish.

In first century Judea, an engagement was legally binding and not easily broken. It was a much stronger commitment. Often, parents would arrange for their children to become engaged. The engagement was the first half of the marriage process.

We use the word engagement here but that is not really the best word. We could think of it as 'betrothed' or as 'pledged to be married.' Or the word I like is used in the old King James version—espoused. 'Mary was espoused to Joseph.'

This espousment involved a marriage contract. This contract could be broken only through a divorce. During the engagement—which often lasted as long as a year—the couple would not live together and could not have relations with anyone else.

When Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he logically suspects her of adultery. This is clear grounds for divorce. The laws in the book of Deuteronomy allow that an engaged woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death at the town gate (Deuteronomy 22:23).

Joseph is described as being a righteous man. Now, to be righteous did not mean that he was simply a good person. To be righteous was a technical term meaning that he was an observer of the Jewish faith and followed God's laws. In this situation of Mary being pregnant, Joseph had every right to seek justice for the wrong committed against him. But that was not the sort of man that he was, and so he chose not to *expose [Mary] to public disgrace* and instead made the decision to obtain a quiet divorce and allow her to go on with her life. They would simply part ways.

However, once he makes this decision, he has a dream, and in the dream an angel speaks to him and says, *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.* Matthew then reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah, *Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."*

Joseph follows the will of the angel and takes Mary as his wife. When she gives birth, Joseph is the one to name the child and he names him Jesus.

That is the story that we know so well. We hear it at least once each year and dozens of times in Christmas songs and carols. In our excitement to get to Christmas, we tend to ignore the implications of the decisions made by Mary and Joseph. Mary is informed by Gabriel that against all odds, she is going to have a son. Because this is God's will she accepts it and offers to serve saying, *Let it be with me according to your word* (Luke 2:38).

The implications of this decision are enormous. As an unwed mother she could be ruined for life. She would have lost Joseph, she would be cast out of society, she probably would never marry, and then there is the possibility that she would be killed. If she lived she will be responsible for caring for a new life by herself. Having a child in the best of circumstances is not an easy endeavor. Put yourselves in her shoes.

Joseph, however, is the one we definitely overlook. When he learns of Mary's pregnancy, he has every right to seek vengeance and ruin her. It's not his child after

all and she has disgraced him. His initial plan to divorce her quietly is an honorable one. It would provide her with as many options as possible.

Joseph is a man with few options. His fiancé is pregnant with a child that is not his. He will be the subject of shame and embarrassment in the community. The best thing he can do is to let her go quietly and hopefully no one will notice.

But the angel speaks to Joseph and points out another way. The angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife and accept the child as his own. This child is unique. The angel tells Joseph the child *will save his people from their sins*.

Mary and Joseph each give themselves in service to God. They agree to have this child. They will get married and have a family and Mary will give birth to other children as well. The child Jesus will grow up to become a rabbi and teacher. Some will call him the Messiah. Others will kill him.

I don't believe that either Mary or Joseph was actively seeking to serve the Lord. But when they found themselves in their predicament, they did not turn away. They accepted God's call to a lifetime of service. Many would call them the first Christians. They were the first to follow the Christ.

There are two ways that one can serve the Lord. The first is the obvious way of actively seeking for opportunities to serve. We wake up in the morning and ask, "What can I do to serve God today?" It can be like high school on Club Sign-up Day when you walk from table to table saying, "I will do this, I won't do that." As we make these choices we are also analyzing what I call 'the calculus of caring.' We do this when we compute the questions 'Do I have time for this? Will it be fun? What will I get out of it?' This is not necessarily a bad thing; it's pretty normal.

The second way of serving is one that we typically see in those people who are more mature in their faith. There is no algebra in their decision process. Their life is an attitude of service. They don't weigh the pros and cons, they simply do, they serve.

We see this in both Mary and Joseph. We don't see them checking their calendars to see if they are busy, they just say yes. God has called; they answer. When we consider the implications for her, Mary's words to the angel are astounding: *Let it be with me according to your word*.

In this season of Advent, the task before us is to ask ourselves the question, 'How do I prepare myself for God coming into this world?' The answer is found in Mary's declaration, *Let it be with me according to your word*. As get closer to Christmas, I ask that you keep these words in your hearts and on your lips. Amen.