



December 12-13, 2015 Sermon by Pastor Scott Fuller



Have you ever been absolutely right – and...dead wrong at the very same time? That's exactly where we find Joseph in our Gospel story for today...

He and Mary have taken that life-altering step of combining their two hearts, two lives, two families in the holy relationship of marriage. Back in those days, the parents arranged it, the couple (hopefully!) approved the choice of their life's mate, and from that moment on, they were legally bound to one another. Though their wedding was still in the planning stages, their union was a permanent bond – able to be broken only by the act of divorce. But that's not going to happen, right? They're young, they're in love, what could possibly go wrong???

...Then one day Mary comes to Joseph, and speaks those terrible torturing words – *I'm pregnant, and the baby is not yours...*

At a time when he **should** be **filled** with joy, **hopeful** for the **future**, looking **forward** to marrying his beloved **Mary**... Joseph **is**, instead, **burdened** with grief.

The one to whom he has **pledged** his love,
the friend with whom he would **share** his life,
the woman whom he has asked to **be** his wife,
has told him that she is **with child** – **without him!**

The drama is great, the tension is high, the strain is almost unbearable – even more so because we know what could happen to an unwed mother and her baby in those difficult, brutal times.

Does anyone know what the Old Testament proscribes as punishment for a woman caught in adultery?

Death, by stoning (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/865-adultery>).

This is incredible – God’s plan to save the world could very well be de-railed before it even gets started!!!

Now, **Matthew** tells us that Joseph is a *righteous* man... and that’s a word that can mean a couple of things. A person who is *righteous* could be *good and honorable*. It could also mean that a person acts *in accord with divine or moral law* – and those two aren’t necessarily the same!

It’s obvious to everyone in town that Mary has been **unfaithful**...
It’s obvious to Joseph that their marriage plans can’t continue...
What’s **not** obvious is how he should deal with Mary.

The **natural** thing would be for him to go **public** with his **pain**, to **protect** his **pride**, to make sure that everyone knows it’s **Mary’s** fault, to make **her** feel the depths of **his** disappointment.

And, as a **righteous man**, he could **even** insist that the entire community follow the letter of the law and stone Mary to death...(along with the child in her womb)...

Well, it turns out that Joseph **is righteous** in a *good and honorable* way, which proves to be true when he decides to **quietly** divorce his pregnant fiancé. Not only does he spare her life, but he also refuses to disgrace her in public.

To divorce Mary **honorably** – that was the **right** thing for a *good and honorable* man to do – but even **that** was the **wrong** thing for **this** *good and honorable* man to do...

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴ and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**

Ironically, this tension at the **end** of Matthew's first chapter is a theme that's already been introduced in the **first** part of the chapter, the genealogy, the ancestors in the family tree of King David.

We moderns quickly lose interest in the seemingly boring list of names printed in those verses. But here are a couple of very important things to note:

1. As you can see, people traced their ancestry back then by the males of the family – so and so was the father of _____, who was father of _____. **And yet, what do you see that's highlighted?** Four **women** are identified: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the Wife of Uriah (who is Bathsheba)...

...and to this select group is added in v. 16, **Mary**, the mother of Jesus. So altogether, five women are given the honor of being named in the lineage of Jesus.

2. The second thing that's important to note is that **each** of these women *could have been shunned by the community* had the people followed the harsh righteousness of the law ...

Tamar seduced her father-in-law to get him to honor what she was owed.

Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho.

Ruth was a foreigner and had no rights living in Israel.

And then there's Bathsheeba – what did she do? Committed adultery with King David.

This kind of sounds like a good, old fashioned soap opera, doesn't it? But, no, this is real life – as real as it gets.

It's ironic that these women are named, when so many **righteous** women are **not** – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel – the list goes on and on. *So why are **these** women named?*

...Well, let's think about it – if the good and righteous law had been applied in deciding the fate of any of those women, the bloodline of King David would have been severed and God's plan to set his son on the throne would have failed.

So in an upside-down-and-inside-out sort of way, it's actually an incredible blessing that these women are named – as well as an incredible insight into God's

great plan to love, and bless, and save the entire creation... And now we add Mary's name to that ignoble list – she who has become pregnant outside of marriage...

What does this mean? Why would God choose such a perilous, precarious, perplexing path to implement heaven's plan to save creation? Any ideas??



It's into this very changeable, challenging situation that God sends the **angel** to **Joseph** in his **anguish**. And true to form, God has a special message for this confused young man.

The Lord tells him that there is:

- something **much** more at stake here than *Joseph's pride*,
- something **far greater** than the truths of *right and wrong*,
- something even **more grand** than the sacred gift of *human love*.

Says the Lord, that which is important for **this child's birth**,
that which is crucial for **this couple's love**,
that which is at stake for **the salvation** of *all souls*, of *all creation*, is...:

our ability to trust **God's Word** over **our experience**,
our ability to believe **God's promise** when we are consumed by **doubt**,
our ability to have faith in **God's grace** when we want to **wield**
the **LAW** – and use it to **hurt** those who have **hurt us**...

So Joseph...this rarely mentioned man in the bible, is actually the hero of **getting it** about **God's grace**. In our worldly human ways, it's rarely easy, often hard to comprehend, and usually difficult to accept God's gift of grace...for **THOSE** people...*and* for...people like *us!!!*

This is **exactly** what we see take place in Joseph's decision to be with Mary, to welcome her as his bride, to stand beside her in her time of need. It's nothing less than a parable of the way that our **Lord Jesus** relates to **us**.

From this promise made by **Joseph** to stand by **Mary** at the **opening** pages of Mathew's gospel, we go to the promise made by **Jesus** to stand by his **followers** at the **end** of Mathew's gospel. Says our Lord as he ascends into heaven, ***Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age!***



You and I most likely won't have the benefit of **angels** entering our **dreams** to **prevent** us from making **mistakes**, especially mistakes that could derail God's plan to bless all of creation. Yet the **truth** is that we **can** give thanks to God for a gift that's **even better**. For unto us, to you and me, and to the entire world, unto us has been given:

- SOME-ONE to help us with our pride,
- SOME-ONE who's worth more than knowing right and wrong,
- SOME-ONE who's greater even than the gift of human love.

Joseph's job, as described by the angel, was to take Mary as his wife, and to name and claim her child as his own. His willingness to take God at his word, to embrace Mary and love that little boy, allowed that child to grow up – and ultimately embrace...you and me – and the world!

It's no small miracle that **you and I** have been blessed by God through Joseph.

For as God worked THE miracle of life:

- in the womb of the young woman Mary,
- in her marriage to Joseph, and
- in the child that they raised,

so God continues to work in **our** lives as well. God has claimed us and named us so that we can help others discover this incredible gift of love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.