

## “Love Wrapped in Flesh”

Matthew 1:18-25

When our son was born, he looked so much like his Daddy that a friend of ours named them Pete and Repeat. Although they still look very much alike, Carter is taller and thinner and has my green eyes. Of course, being a woman, I don't really know much about the father/son relationship but I have heard him say more than once that his Dad is his best friend. And Danny has been a wonderful role model for him over the years – teaching him how to respect his elders, demonstrating the good manners of a fine southern boy. He has taught him how to drive a boat and how to fix things and how to install a new toilet. He has also shown him how to hunt, how to smoke a cigar and a few other things that probably aren't good sermon material.

There is a Rodney Atkins country song called “Watchin’ You” in which the singer asks his four year old how he learned to do everything from say a bad word to pray and the answer is the chorus of the song.

He said, "I've been watching you, dad ain't that cool?

I'm your buckaroo, I wanna' be like you.

And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are.

We like fixin' things and holding momma's hand

Yeah, we're just alike, hey, ain't we dad?

I want to do everything you do; so I've been watching you."

Knowing how important it is that my son has this wonderful opportunity to see what manhood is all about makes me grateful every day that I married such a fine man. It also really

made me think about how God came to the decision that Joseph should be the earthly father of his Son, Jesus. Poor Joseph doesn't get much attention in the Christmas drama and today's Scripture provides just about all we know of him. However, with guidance from the Holy Spirit, I think we can discern much about his character.

The first thing the Scripture tells us about Joseph is that he is righteous. I suppose that means that he knew right from wrong and being a good Jew that would mean that he knew and understood the Law AND that he followed it as well. You see, the Law said that if a wife committed adultery, the husband HAD to divorce her. He really had no choice. So being righteous, Joseph was going to follow the Law and divorce Mary, even if he loved her.

However, a better translation from the Greek might read, "Her husband, Joseph, was an upright man." I like the word "upright" because it implies something different to me altogether than simply righteous. It implies that someone stands a little taller, head and shoulders above the others. We would certainly think that this is the kind of man that God would have chosen to be in charge of his Son while he was on loan to us here on earth.

But the reason I think upright would be a better choice is because Joseph mixes his righteousness with kindness. Although he knew what he had to do, he had compassion for Mary and didn't want to disgrace her publicly and decided to follow the Law with the least amount of injury to her as possible. And on this fourth Sunday of Advent as we light the candle of love, this passage is so appropriate because it highlights what a man of love Joseph really is.

Joseph must have loved Mary to be worried about her reputation and her feelings. Even if their betrothal had been arranged, she had captured his heart. Yet, he was willing to follow the Law over his heart. And by this we know that Joseph loved God more than he loved Mary. This

would be an important role model for Joseph to demonstrate to Jesus as he was growing up – to love the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength and might.

Something else that this story tells us about Joseph's character is that, when he had to choose between legalism and love, he chose love. Perhaps this is where Jesus learned this lesson that HE put into practice so often – by the actions of his carpenter father. While Joseph's sense of obedience to the Law forced him in all good consciousness to divorce Mary, his unwillingness to expose her to public disgrace showed that he was kind and merciful.

This lesson of compassion must be something Joseph continued to exemplify to Jesus because we know that, all throughout his short ministry, we saw Jesus putting people's needs above the details of the Law. Of course, Jesus also knew that the Law had been distorted from its original spirit and wanted to teach the people of his day how to honor the law and still show God's love along with it.

So Joseph is just and a man of love, but there is one other very important trait that Joseph must have modeled for Jesus. He was obedient. Unfortunately in our day and time, many young couples get pregnant and raise children without the benefit of marriage and we have come to accept it as something that has changed with the times. But in first Century Palestine, it was simply unheard of. We can only imagine the judgment, the speculation, the lack of respect that both Joseph and Mary faced. We have to think about how radically Joseph's life changed.

I think author Max Lucado really hits the nose on the head when he describes Joseph in his book *God Came Near*. “Joseph was perched firmly on his branch in the tree. It was thick, reliable, and perfect for sitting. It was so strong that he didn't tremble when the storms came, nor did he shake when the winds blew. No, this branch was predictable and solid and Joseph had no intention of leaving it.” Now the branch that Joseph was sitting on sounds like the place to be

to me. Secure, safe. There were no risks involved. So what in the world made Joseph get off of that branch and go out on a limb when he chose to stay by Mary's side?

Our Scripture lesson this morning tells us that the answer is simple: God TOLD him to. God sent an angel to tell Joseph to trust in him because God had a plan to use him for the salvation for the world. Which means that, of all the characteristics we see in Joseph, perhaps the one that should rise to the top of the list is obedience. Because when God said “GO” Joseph went. GOD basically called Joseph off of that branch and told him to go out on a limb. What faith Joseph had to climb down from his safe place.

And the truth is that, in order for any of us to be obedient, there is an element of faith that must be present. Joseph’s faith reminds me of a cross-stitch in my best friend’s kitchen. It reads “The will of God does not call you where the grace of God cannot carry you.” Joseph knew that if he walked in the will of His Heavenly father, God would take care of him no matter how wobbly he felt.

How did Joseph get such faith? It was not because he understood what had happened. How could anyone have really understood it – it is even hard to comprehend today. But look closely at what the angel came to tell Joseph. I had always thought that the angel visited Joseph to explain Mary’s predicament to him. I mean, having an angel visit you would probably get your attention and make a believer out of you. But I was ignoring an important part of the story. The angel didn’t come to *explain* things, he came to tell him to be brave and continue to have faith. The angel said, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary into your home.” Surely this reassurance of God’s will helped him to be obedient.

There is another amazing thing about Joseph that came to me as I studied this passage. The fact that the angel came to him IN A DREAM! Not a burning bush or the parting of the sea

which could be seen. Not even in the form of an angel as he did to Zechariah and Mary, which could be heard – but in a dream. Have you ever had a dream that was so vivid that when you woke up, you thought it was real? Sometimes it is not until the milk covers the Cherrios that we get oriented enough to realize that the dream was just that . . . a dream.

But only a person of great faith, who had a strong relationship with God would have the courage to believe that God would make His will known to him in a dream. So among his other attributes, Joseph was clearly a man of great faith. And in his heart of hearts, he knew that the only thing worse than *following* God's will was **NOT** following it. He also knew that because his righteousness, mercy and kindness were gifts from God that God would empower him to use those gifts when he was out on that limb.

Friends, we are not that different from Joseph today. I believe that we ALL are being called out on a limb everyday. It may be in a grand way – to start a campaign to raise money for some worthy cause or to volunteer in a place where we are uncomfortable. To accept a position of leadership in the church that may be out of your comfort zone. It may be in a small way. To sit on a different pew to make a visitor feel welcome or at a different table during a time of fellowship to get to know a brother or sister in Christ better than you already do. To begin the New Year by finding a Sunday School class. It may be in a way that is known only to you – to forgive someone of something that has held on to you for too long. To make that phone call to the daughter or friend who has hurt you and build bridges.

Whatever our time or place in life, God calls us to be obedient to his will, as Joseph was. Even when we are afraid. And although Joseph is clearly brave because he stands by Mary, knowing what it could cost them both, I believe that he HAD to worry about what the future would bring.

And if you think about the rest of the story, any fears that he had were probably realized. Look at what Joseph had to go through. He took cold showers for nine months so his wife's reputation could remain intact. He cleared cow patties out of a barn to help his wife deliver the savior on a bed of hay. He learned Egyptian and lived as an alien for two years, all because he was obedient to the will of God.

Friends, in a world where there are so many uncertainties, Joseph's faith, love and obedient nature can bring us the courage to face whatever comes our way. And our strongest reminder of this is in what God instructed Joseph to name his child. Emmanuel – God with us. Love wrapped in flesh.

So while our nation has soldiers in many foreign lands, we can have faith in Emmanuel, God with us, who leads his people out of danger just as Joseph was led to hide in Egypt after Jesus was born. While many of us will face the first Christmas without a special friend or loved one this year because we have been separated by death, Emmanuel, God with us can comfort us and remind us that God's will brings about happy endings. So whether our tasks are grand or simple – because we have the story of Joseph, we can have faith that God is still with us today. Helping us lead people to his kingdom on earth. Filling us with love to share with others.

And it is only fitting, as we journey closer to Bethlehem and the manger that held the savior of the world, that we are given this story of God choosing such a loving man for his earthly father. And what a love to remember Emmanuel, God with us for all eternity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.