

“From Righteousness to Obedience”

Rev. Eric. S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

December 18, 2016

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

There's a Christmas song from 1991 which has become a modern classic. It is called “Mary, Did You Know?” I imagine most of us have heard the song, and many may have great fondness for it. I must admit mixed feelings about the song. It *is* beautiful. At my former church, there was a guest soloist who we asked to sing it each year. I can still hear her lovely and powerful voice singing it. The lyrics speak of many miracles which Jesus would later perform, and about his saving grace. I generally like this song very much. However, as noted by others, the repetition of “Mary, did you know” seems to neglect what we call the Magnificat, or Mary's Song, recorded in Luke 1. Mary speaks of how, through Jesus, God will do these amazing things. It seems that Mary *did* know what Jesus was to be about and she responded to God's call on her life with that great line we talked about last week: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

I wonder if, instead, the song should be about Joseph. “Joseph, did *you* know?” We read about Joseph just a bit ago, in Matthew's rather sparse birth narrative. Matthew doesn't give us any of the information about the census or about shepherds or the manger. We don't hear about there being no room in the inn or about the heavenly host singing praises to God. What we *do* get is a glimpse into the mindset of Joseph, and thus the question: “Joseph, did you know?” It seems that Joseph, at least at first, did *not* know about Jesus and this miraculous birth which was to take place.

As Matthew tells us, Joseph and Mary were engaged. In the culture of that day, engagement was a legally binding contract. The couple was essentially married, but they did not yet live with each other and did not consummate the marriage. The only way out of engagement was divorce, and the laws of the day were explicit. It seems that Mary has been unfaithful – how else could she be pregnant? – and so Joseph is obligated to divorce her. In fact, the Deuteronomic Code calls for public stoning for adultery. This is what is expected of Joseph, and yet Matthew tells us that Joseph had plans to simply divorce her quietly, without a public rebuke or harming her – and her child – in any way. Even though he was likely to face great embarrassment due to Mary's apparent infidelity, Joseph was honorable and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. Joseph, though he doesn't know the truth about Mary's child, is righteous and merciful, and chooses the honorable thing because he was an honorable man. However, Joseph did not yet know that God was breaking into his world, which would change Joseph from an righteous man to an *obedient* man.

Joseph has decided what to do and then he has a powerful dream. In this dream, an angel of the Lord fills him in on the situation. Mary has not been unfaithful. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, and he will save his people from their sins. And all of this is in fulfillment of the Lord's words through the prophet Isaiah, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"

Alyce McKenzie, a professor of preaching and worship, responds to the question, What caused the change between planning for divorce and becoming the earthly father of Jesus? She says "a night of birthing just as real as Christmas Eve. The birth of an earthly father for the Son of God. In his sleeping state, Joseph allows God to speak to the depths of his heart and to propose a resolution to the dilemma that his human reason had failed to discern."¹

Joseph becomes an obedient man by listening to the voice of God in his dream and following through on what God had told him. Matthew tells us Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him."

In many ways, Joseph stays in the background of the Christmas story. Luke barely mentions him. There are no lines of dialogue for Joseph in the entire Bible. He is often nearly in the shadows of manger scenes, nearly indistinguishable from the shepherds. And yet this Joseph was entrusted by God with a decision which would change the world. Joseph had to choose to not have Mary stoned. Joseph had to choose whether to give the child within Mary the legitimacy of a legal father. This guy who barely crosses our minds had to make an astounding choice just as did Mary, and Joseph, like Mary, chose the path of obedience.

"Joseph, did you know?" He does now. The voice of the Lord in his dream has told him what he needed to know, and he chose not to ignore that voice, but to obey it. Because he did so, the Son of God became the Son of Man. Retired Pastor Bill Bouknight writes that, before baptizing their child, he always asks parents the uncomfortable question of whether they have written a will, specifying who would take care of their child if they were not able to do so. He writes "God had to answer that question when he decided to send his son Jesus to planet earth."² He had to choose an earthly mother and father, and he chose Mary and Joseph.

It's certainly not an adequate comparison, but adoption often works that way. Whether by the child's birthparent(s), an adoption agency, or a government agency, adoptive parents are often chosen to be the parents of a particular child. I know the weight that comes with that decision, having been chosen to be the father of three children who were not born to me. I can only imagine the weight of being the earthly father of the Son of God. God chose a simple carpenter – not someone rich and famous, not some religious leader, not some government leader. In a song about Joseph, contemporary Christian artist Todd Agnew writes of his humble status: "This is all I have to give. You can share my home and bear my name." God chose an ordinary man, and an ordinary woman, and put the hope of the world in their hands. Through their obedience to God's plan, the world is ultimately saved.

¹ pg. 15, *Matthew commentary*

² Bill Bouknight, *Collected Sermons*

These simple, ordinary people had to make extraordinary choices, and they did so. God used their lowly status and brought about the greatest miracle, the birth of the savior. Their obedience to God, though it changed everything about the lives that they had planned, changed the world for each of us, as well. This was not easy for them – Joseph and Mary both faced humiliation and embarrassment, as the world would little believe what the angel had told each of them. They would face a challenging life. Mary would be told by Simeon, “a sword will pierce your own soul,” or as the Contemporary English Version puts it, “you, Mary, will suffer as though you had been stabbed by a dagger.” (Luke 2:35) And yet, they were obedient, so that God could do mighty things through them.

No less is expected of us. Brett Younger, Professor of Preaching, writes: “We’re tempted to live a careful life, a careful faith, keep six of the Ten Commandments, go to church three out of four Sundays, give money we don’t need and time we can spare, try to do more good than bad, offer some grace and some judgment, believe the parts of the Bible with which we already agree.”³

We are called to more than that. We are called to be obedient to God, risking all for the sake of the call. We must listen to the voice of God, whether it is in our dreams, in our prayers, in our devotional time, in our reading of scripture, or in any place. God calls each of us to lives of greater dedication and obedience, like Mary and Joseph. God calls this church to greater dedication and obedience, to be a place where we come together in unity to serve others and worship God. Dream dreams, take chances, step out in faith, knowing that the God of hope is leading us. The very God who placed the life of his Son into the hands of two very human people, trusting that they would set aside their cautious faith and be obedient to the will of their God in raising the One who is the hope of the world.

Mary and Joseph trusted and obeyed. They named the child Jesus, which means “God saves.” He is Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” God saves and God is with us. And that is our hope. Amen.

³ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4440/josephs-dreams>